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One Year

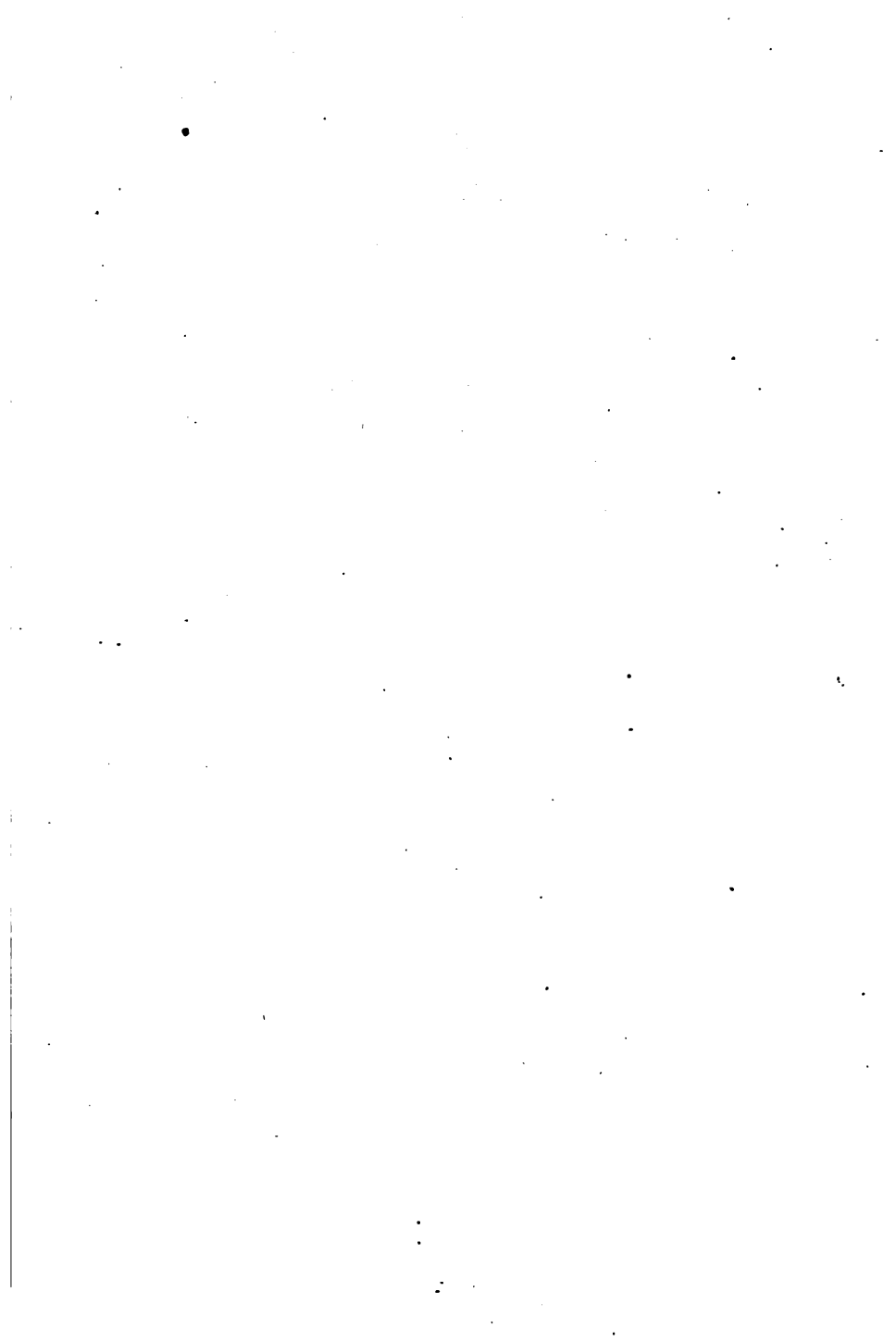


Or the Three Homes









ONE YEAR;  
OR,  
A STORY OF THREE HOMES.







Front.

*Ursule and her Favourites.*

P. 3





ONE YEAR;  
OR,  
A STORY OF THREE HOMES.

BY F. M. P.,  
AUTHOR OF 'TALES OF THE SOUTH OF FRANCE'

'Our life has not one link to cast away.'

J. E. BROWN.

*WITH ORIGINAL ILLUSTRATIONS.*



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So SIMPLE a story as that contained in the following pages would scarcely require the conventional Preface, were it not, perhaps, necessary to remark, in connection with a fact incidentally referred to, that Carrier's barbarous *fusillade* of children on the plains of Nantes, although now partially forgotten, ranks among the most atrocious of the deeds committed by the 'Mountain' party during the excesses of the French Revolution.





ONE YEAR;

OR,

A STORY OF THREE HOMES.







*Front.*

*Ursule and her Favourites.*

*P. 3*





ness, 'never so degrade yourself. Imitate me, who have always resisted selfish indulgences, always sacrificed the flesh. And yet I have had my temptations in those bygone days. What *pâtés*!—what *fricandeaux*! You, with your eternal soups and vegetables, and only an occasional chocolate *bon-bon* for consolation, know absolutely nothing of what a *fricandeau* may be. But it is vanity; it must all be renounced, child.'

Upon which Ursule, who had no *fricandeaux* to renounce, would look at Madame and wonder vaguely whether by sacrificing the flesh it must grow so wrinkled and colourless as the wizened face before her. Threescore years and upwards set their mark more unmistakably upon a French than an English woman, to which must be added that Madame d'Aurigny had not only known many sorrows and some reverse of fortune, but had lived alone with her sad memories until she unconsciously multiplied them, and actually revelled in troubles which she had never experienced. She had her fits of vivacity, and her fits of depression. In the former she employed herself by going out to visit the little circle of acquaintances with whom she still kept up a ceremonious intercourse, or by bargaining in the market: in the latter she sat drearily at home, bewailed herself to Ursule, and inveighed with particular fervour against the odour of Monsieur Sanson's little stews. Madame was tall, gaunt, untidy-looking. Her white frizzly hair was arranged round her face in tiers of short horizontal curls. When she spoke, her eyes still sparkled keenly, but her eyebrows lifted her forehead into long ridged lines. She had lived in the old house fifteen years; Ursule, her father and her brother, nine—more than half the girl's lifetime, for she was only seventeen, and they came to the Sansons' a short time before her mother died. Madame was *au premier*; the Lafons, *au second*. Madame, al-

though, as she would tell you, by many heartrending circumstances reduced to poverty, had never dropped the aristocratic *de* which preceded her name and lifted her above the level of ordinary mortals. Jean Lafon, although calling himself artist, cared little in what level he found himself. Madame could not possibly know the family. Madame never once in all those long years had ascended *au second*. Madame shut her eyes to the fact that there were other lodgers in the house. But when a little brown sprite came dancing down the stairs at all manner of unexpected times, and, with the undaunted confidence of childhood, wished Madame a smiling '*Bon jour*,' it was impossible to ignore her existence or to avoid making friends. Ursule was soon free of the first floor; and since that period Madame had alternately petted, scolded, entreated, quarrelled with, and in vain attempted to tyrannize over her. The girl was loving and compassionate, but of too wilful a spirit to succumb to her dominion, and utterly and immeasurably scornful over the superiority conferred by a *de*. It was not therefore to be wondered at that quarrels between the oddly assorted pair were frequent, and that Ursule was in the habit of keeping angrily away from Madame's room, to the extreme discomfort of the latter, until, scolded into propriety by Louis, or smitten with sudden contrition at the idea of the desolation below, she would fly down the staircase into the cold bare room, always carefully designated by Madame d'Aurigny the *salon*, sure of the same scene meeting her eyes—the red brick floor partially hidden by little strips of carpet—the bed in its cupboard-like recess, curtained off from view—the great gilt clock, with fat Cupids supporting it, ticking monotonously on the chimney-piece—two pieces of modern French china on either side—and Madame, with a rigid and melancholy face, sitting sadly at the window, seeking distraction

by watching the hairdresser's shop opposite, and the little crowd continually passing out and in.

On the evening of the day when the short conversation already related took place, Ursule found it thus. She received no greeting or notice of any kind, not so much as a look ; but she knew Madame too well to expect it, nor, to tell the truth, was her penitence deep. She only shrugged her shoulders impatiently, began to hum a merry country *chanson*, and, snatching a brush from its hiding-place, energetically attacked the corners of the room, and presently raised a dust which was certainly set flying rather more extensively than was necessary.

Madame was quite conscious of her enemy's tactics, and struggled hard to preserve her dignity. It was in vain. Fairly driven to desperation by the cloud that enveloped her, she rose up, and angrily shaking her skirts, exclaimed,

'Have done, then, with folly, Ursule ! this is not a time to disturb me thus ! In the morning, when I was absent, it would have been a suitable attention ; but I desire that I may at least be permitted to pass my evenings in peace.'

'Ah, *pardon!*' answered Ursule, pausing in her labour, and looking a pretty roguish picture, as she daintily turned back her cuffs, and stole a glance at Madame with sparkling eyes. 'I am grieved to disarrange Madame, but she sees the state of the room ; it is really a disgrace——'

'It should have been done this morning.'

'This morning ? ah, yes ! But I had so much to occupy me this morning ; Madame Paul sent for me, and Louis—poor Louis !—has been so suffering.'

The mischievous expression faded out of her eyes, her voice became unconsciously sorrowful, her figure drooped : Madame grew interested in the change.

‘I know the reason,’ said she, decidedly. ‘Yesterday he sat too long in the balcony. The sun was scorching, and I heard your voices there for hours.’

‘It may have been so,’ Ursule said wearily, letting the brush drop, the dust subside into fresh lodgments, and seating herself upon the low window-sill in her favourite attitude, her hands clasped round one knee. ‘But sometimes I think there always is something ; and it is so little, so little that does it.’

Madame was too sensible of the relief of having her young opponent at her feet, dejected, softened, requiring only sympathy to be completely subdued, to dare to push her advantage far ; but she could not refrain from one slap.

‘The young persons of this day have no prudence. They adopt their own ways, their own plans. They reject their elders’ counsel.’

‘I am sure we reject no one’s counsel,’ said Ursule, still sad ; ‘on the contrary, it seems to me that we follow everybody’s by turn. But yesterday Louis was so restless and uneasy in the room ~~that~~ at least it gave him a change to have the air in the balcony, and I remembered that you had warned me last week that the evening air was evil. What can one do ? If one has not the sun, one must have the dew ; if one has not the dew, one must have the sun ! There is always something. And he seemed better ; he had quite an appetite for the little cake good Madame Sanson brought up to him.’

‘Oh !’ said Madame sententiously, ‘I am satisfied. That explains all. If you will allow the Sansons to overwhelm him with their coarse cookery, no wonder that the poor boy is suffering.’

Madame pulled some knitting out of a capacious pocket, and applied herself to its intricacies with an air of having satisfac-

torily disposed of the subject. Ursule broke into a merry laugh, her buoyant spirit in a moment shaking off the depression which had clouded it. 'Their coarse cookery is very fine to us; we have had no experience to make us dainty in our tastes. You shake your head: ah, well, what would you have? One must taste to know. Besides which, to me Madame's dishes are delicious; only I cannot bear so much as to touch them when it is so good for Louis to have a change. But I must return to him directly,' she exclaimed, springing up from her low seat; 'and after all the room is not finished, Madame. Would you rather I waited until to-morrow? Really, the dust is as thick as all that,' raising one hand above the other to show an appalling depth.

'Bah, bah!' returned the old lady, with impatience; 'what has done will do; the dust makes no mischief, if only you will let it alone. However, if you must, to-morrow—yes, to-morrow, when I go to market. That old *cochon*, Michael, sold me eggs yesterday that were not fresh. To-morrow, child, dust everything, and make it tidy. Thursday is the Fête Dieu, and Madame Grignon and Madame Larousse come to me to see the spectacle from my *salon*. *Ciel*, what a fête it will be! All the newly confirmed in their fresh white toilettes—soldiers, music, everything that can inspire us. Ah, you poor Protestants, what a dull religion they give you, who are called your priests! We shall sit on the balcony, and Madame Grignon, who is connected distantly with Monsieur l'Abbé d'O., assures me on the best authority that one of the stations will be exactly in front of this house, so that all the procession will be stopped, and we shall see it to perfection. It is not every one, after all, who has the advantage of living *au premier*; the position assists one to endure much—even the smell of Sanson's bad cooking.

Of what are you thinking, Ursule?' Madame d'Aurigny added, patting her hand with unusual graciousness. 'Some day, who knows? you too may live *au premier*.'

'It was not of that I was thinking,' Ursule answered abstractedly, 'but of the fête. For the other, I do not wish it; I like the second best. It is nearer the sky.'

'Nearer the sky! Is it possible!—do I dream! Do you talk of the sky, which is so common that everybody can see it! And this, after all the care, the pains, I have taken to form, to give ideas. I can do no more—I yield—I wash my hands of you.'

'But you cannot dust your room without me,' interrupted Ursule, merrily. '*Bon soir*, Madame; I undertake that everything shall be as you like it for your friends, and I will bring down the great oak chair which stands in our room, so that you shall receive them like a princess.'

'Ah!' said Madame d'Aurigny, mollified; 'stay, Ursule——' But the girl was already gone.

She ran gladly up the stairs—she was always glad when going back to Louis—and at the door she stopped, smiling. To ordinary eyes there was not much to smile over in the room itself; while not so formal in arrangement, it was even more shabbily furnished than Madame's down below; only the most necessary articles remained in it, and these—with the exception of one very handsome high-backed oak chair, which seemed to belong to the same date as the staircase—were of the roughest, plainest description. A curtain portioned off the little recess where Ursule slept, it is true; but, long ago, the last vestige of colour had been washed out of the flowered chintz which composed it. The glass in the windows was so green and uneven, that nothing looked natural which was viewed through its

medium; and as to the floor, there was no attempt at covering the red bricks except at one spot, where reposed a tiny square of faded carpet.

Yet the room was far prettier and more interesting than Madame's *salon*, and contained certain points on which the eye rested with pleasure. Leaning against the wall were a few pictures, one or two mere sketches daubed in with bright dashes of colour, but all in their way significant and powerful. One there was in particular which arrested the fancy, a long low painting of a sea view, wild and gloomy, as if it represented the gradual rising of a storm. There was no land, no ship, no human interest, and yet the picture was a poem. Piles of heavy clouds gathered ominously together; fierce sunset lights broke luridly out from the increasing darkness; the sea, answering to the movements overhead, was lashing itself into fury. But perhaps the chief strength of the painting lay in the feeling it conveyed of repression, as if, through all the visible stir, there was a holding back of worse things: the sunset lights had not yet died out, hope was not over; how would it end? Had Jean Lafon unconsciously pictured his own life? Who knows?

A heap of large waxy yellow and red bigarreau cherries were temptingly arranged in a green leaf upon the table which was drawn near a little low couch—Louis' resting-place. It was there that Ursule's eyes dwelt with a look of infinite tenderness. She thought her brother was asleep, for he lay quite still, this boy of sixteen, who, born a cripple, had passed through childhood without tasting the joyousness of a child's existence, and now was lengthening out—not growing up—to manhood, the same helpless burden as ever. His eyes were closed, his face turned towards the door; one hand was under his cheek.

Though the hazel eyes were hidden, you could see that the face was beautiful, the nose short and straight, the lips rather full, the chin round. Brown hair lifted itself a little from the forehead, and the long curved eyelashes were darker than the hair. Only the colouring and roundness of health was wanting, and even now the usual suffering look was veiled by a half smile flickering tremulously round the mouth. The next instant it broke out unrestrainedly, his eyes opened, and Ursule darted to his side. She knelt down, and laid her cheek against his.

‘Thou hast had a good sleep, my Louis ; I am so glad !’

‘Not a sleep, but a day-dream. I have been a hundred leagues away.’

‘And left me behind ?’ Ursule said, with a little quick reproachful gesture. She could not endure that he should separate himself from her even in his dreams.

‘We shall see. At all events, I have come back now, and I want to hear how you and Madame got on. Have you been good ? Is she still angry with my poor soup ?’

‘No—yes—no ; that is to say, she was angry, but I brought her round in a cloud of dust, and then it was all nearly undone again because I said I liked to look at the sky. However, do not be troubled ; she is not really vexed. I have promised to lend her the big chair. Oh, Louis !’ Ursule jumped up and clapped her hands delightedly, ‘I have something to tell.’

‘Ah ? And I too.’

‘Thou ? Has Madame Sanson been up ?’

‘No.’

‘Not Monsieur, I know : Monsieur is too fat. Pierre Renait ?’



‘Not a creature.’

Ursule pondered. ‘*Tiens*, I have it!’ she exclaimed, presently; ‘a letter has come from our father.’

‘When he left us but yesterday, and I told you no one had been up! Do letters come of themselves, little wise-head?’

Ursule pretended to pout. ‘I don’t like secrets,’ said she.

‘*Eh bien!* find it out. Guess again. No? There, I give you warning I shall make my own bargain; you shall tell me your news, and perhaps I will tell you mine.’

His sister pinched his arm, and called him a usurer. ‘I have a more generous spirit, and care not for conditions. The day after to-morrow is the great June fête; the principal stations will be in this street, and you will see everything to perfection. There! Last year—do you remember?—you were ill, and it was all lost on us.’

‘So the big chair is for Madame?’

‘Yes; she has friends who will sit solemnly in the balcony and behold everything.’

‘Has she invited you?’

‘How, I! To meet her friends! She called me a little Protestant. To tell you the truth, Louis,’ said the girl, drawing up her head proudly, ‘I care not greatly for being a Protestant except when they mock me for it, and then—I would not be anything else for the world.’

‘Madame has Protestant relations of her own?’ said Louis, letting Ursule’s doctrinal opinions pass for once without comment; ‘you have often told me so.’

‘Yes, there is her sister, and her sister’s English son, Monsieur Clément Blunt. She talks of them so much; she hopes, I

think, continually, that they will come and see her. Poor Madame! she says no good thing that ever she hopes for comes. That is terrible, Louis, is it not? Now, to me, it seems that so many good things come just when one wants them most, and does not expect to have them—when matters are at their worst, sometimes; and my father has been tiresome and horrid for ever so long—you need not shake your head, Louis, I must say it to somebody—then, all of a sudden, he takes a turn and works at a picture, sells it, gives me some of the money, and we can go on again. And when you are ill, and I am fretting because I have nothing nice to give you, up comes dear old Madame Sanson with her good-natured face, and just the very thing I want pops out from under her apron. Oh, it is wonderful! One has so many nice surprises in the world!’

Her brightness infected Louis; his eyes sparkled.

‘Have you forgotten that it is I who am to give you a surprise this time?’ said he, blithely.

‘No, no, I have not forgotten that your secret is coming; I am wondering and wondering to myself while I talk. But it is to be very charming, remember. It is to be the best of all, because it comes from you.’

Louis smiled gravely, and a little nervously. He put his hand under his pillow, and slowly drew out something which he placed in Ursule’s hand. She looked at it in an ecstasy of wonder and delight.

It was a little picture, delicately painted in water-colours, of a young girl caressing her pigeons. One she clasped, and smoothed the soft feathers, while her head was turned towards another, which had just fluttered on her shoulder. It was not difficult to see who had been Louis’ model. Shall I describe

Ursule? It is time to do so; and yet hers was just one of those faces which it is almost impossible to realise by description, for the interest lay entirely in expression. She was not even pretty, yet she looked so as she stood with the flush of delighted pride upon her face, her lips slightly parted, her grey eyes sparkling and tender; her whole countenance lit with sweet unselfish sympathy. It was pleasant to see the deep love evidently existing between the young brother and sister: she so entirely wrapped in him that no consciousness of who was represented in the little painting crossed her mind, only wonder at Louis' surprising genius; and he showing his affection in the care with which he had fashioned every fold of her simple dark dress, the wave in her hair, the ribbon bound round her head, the graceful poise of her slender figure, the little prettinesses which no stranger would have recognized. Ursule's voice trembled almost into a sob as she laid her hands upon his shoulders, and looked full into his eyes:

'Oh, Louis, is it your doing? Your very, very own?'

For answer he drew down her head and kissed her, and the two whispered gleefully to one another like a pair of little children.

'How clever! How beautiful!'

'Do you really like it?'

'Like it! Why, Louis, who could have done it better?'

'Ah, you see, who knows? I may do something yet.'

'Has Pierre seen it?'

'No, no!'

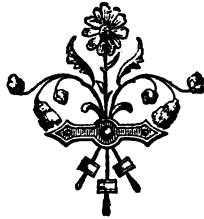
'What will he say?'

And Ursule drew herself back once more to look at it, and said, after a long scrutiny, quite naively, 'She has such a pretty face!' whereupon Louis broke into a peal of laughter so joyous

and hearty, and unlike his usual quiet amusement, that good Madame Sanson downstairs stopped in her work, smiled for sympathy, and said to her husband, 'Listen, Jules, *mon ami*, that is all your little cake.'

Monsieur Sanson sighed.

'It was delicate,' he said, 'the flavour was ravishing, and—it was the last.'





## CHAPTER II.

LOUIS.

And I know full well, though I cannot see,  
How the calmness falls over meadow and tree;  
And the carven pinnacles, clear and high,  
How still they stand in the quiet sky.

DER TOD ALS FREUND.

**L**EAN LAFON was an artist; that is to say, when he was a boy he had displayed a talent for painting, which, unfortunately, was sufficiently marked to prove an excuse for idleness. His mother loved him very dearly, and it is easy to build visionary castles for those we love. He used to talk grandly of the things he would do some day, and of it being not worth while to attend to little things meanwhile. Madame Lafon was ready to believe that she had in her son a great painter, who could leap, whenever he liked, to the highest point of fame. So also thought Marie Laget when she married him. When she died—eight years afterwards—she was content to pray passionately that her children might be kept from starvation. Dreams of fame fade quickly if want stands gaunt and grim before the door, and Marie grew bitter when she lost trust in her husband. Had he

honestly tried and failed, she would have comforted, and loved, and believed in him the more; but when success was in his power—when he used it sufficiently to gratify his own wants, his wishes, his pleasures, leaving her and the children to struggle on as they might—when selfishness was the only motive that stung him to exertion, Marie's love drifted away from him and centered in the children. For them she toiled day and night, caring nothing for her own suffering and failing health; and just when it seemed as if they could least do without her, she died—died, raising herself upon her elbow to give Louis one long, last, yearning kiss. Madame Sanson used often to speak of it in after-days, and never without tears. It was the ending of a life which, to the lookers-on who judged from the same level, seemed unlovely and failing, full of twists, unravellings, and rugged knots, but wherein, it may be, higher Eyes discerned the golden thread which beautified the whole.

It was very hard to her to go and leave her cripple-boy behind. Almost her last words were to impress upon Ursule the charge she left to her. And it was, in all probability, the remembrance of this which made the girl, childish as she was in other ways, so womanly, almost motherly, in her care of Louis. In this she had never once failed.

All the nursery ogres that ever existed were rolled into one by Madame Sanson when she wanted to find a comparison for what was likely to prove the behaviour of Jean Lafon at this juncture; but whether, as she persisted in affirming, he was possessed by the spirit of contradiction, or not, it is true that he certainly disappointed her expectations. He did not desert his children and leave them on her hands; but, on the contrary, he worked harder than he had been known to do before, for several months in succession. He finished off and success-

fully sold two or three original sketches, executed a commission for copying a famous opal-tinted Cuyp, with cows standing in a marsh by a broad canal ; and, having satisfied his conscience by leaving money enough to support the children for a certain time, went off to indulge his love for a roving gipsy life. Ever since that day Ursule and Louis had lived on in the old house. Their father came home from time to time—they could never calculate when—sometimes bringing with him a finished picture, but more often painting after his arrival ; providing Ursule with money at most uncertain intervals, and often reducing her to hard shifts. She had a brave, undaunted spirit, and never complained for herself : but for Louis she often shed bitter tears ; and the delicate boy could not have struggled through it all, had not Madame Sanson with motherly kindness helped poor Ursule in her charge. As for Madame d'Aurigny, although, to hear her talk, you would have supposed her to be the girl's protector, she was in truth but another burden. If any person had taken the trouble to set down the services on either side in a debtor and creditor account, Madame must have been credited with unlimited advice upon certain subjects, prominent among which stood the treatment of Louis (whom she had never seen), due contempt for Monsieur Sanson's cooking qualities, due respect for noble birth, and a just view of the importance of attaining a deportment which was distinguished by her with the title of *comme il faut*. Ursule, on her side, cleaned Madame's room, nursed her when she was ill, ran errands for her, and kept a human interest alive in the sad, desolate old heart.

It was not, as people say, by any means all love between them. Madame was sharp, and Ursule naughty with everybody except Louis : there was plenty of sparring and retort. 'You seek occasion—you desire to enrage me !' Madame would

exclaim, stamping her foot and letting her little grey curls quiver with excitement, and then out would pour Ursule's torrent of indignation. The wonder lay in the rapidity with which the storm would subside. Louis was general peacemaker. Whatever tempests vexed the house, from that clear atmosphere of patient love came down, no one quite knew how, all manner of soothing influences and kindly suggestions. I think it must have been the realization of how great a burden he had to bear which made all the others feel their petty jars and frets so contemptible. His shrinking, sensitive nature, wanting the vigour that is necessary to lead others, still influenced them unconsciously by a pathetic power. Ursule's infinitely stronger character rested confidently upon his. He possessed the rare gift of a quick, sympathetic imagination, that enabled him almost to identify himself with whoever claimed his interest, and the charm deepened a hundredfold as belonging to one who might so easily have absorbed himself in the contemplation of his own trials.

He never came down-stairs: it was suffering enough for him to move from one room into the other, or out upon the balcony; worse suffering often than Ursule could well bear to see. But he inherited his father's artist-eye, and made pictures out of everything; out of a flower growing on the steep, red-tiled roof opposite; out of the gloomy arched entrance and quaint gables of another house; out of the shop beside it, filled with creamy ivory carvings; out of the country-people passing below, with shrill-pitched, merry voices, on their way to the church, to the market, to the shops. In the keen, clear French atmosphere all the colours—red, blue, yellow—stood sharply out against the background of white houses; and on fête or market days, when the peasant-women roused in num-



bers into the old town, and chatted and gesticulated while their poultry cackled, black-eyed girls in snowy caps, short petticoats, and stout shoes, carrying heavy triangular baskets of fish upon their backs, older women here and there among them, still preserving the picturesque dress of ancient Normandy, and conspicuous for their towering muslin caps, chains and crosses, bright kerchiefs, and striped aprons, Louis' bird's-eye-view of life was animated.

For other things, which he could never see, he depended upon Ursule's descriptions, which she had learned to render as faithfully as any landscape-painter. Nothing passed unheeded that might be stored up for Louis' amusement. Sometimes she would go to the cathedral, and return to him with quiet, grave pictures of the niched figures which looked peacefully down upon the world below, from out of their fretted canopies; or, better still, of shadowy nooks into which she had penetrated, sombre, solemn depths of dark stone where exquisite carvings were mouldering away, and the grass growing up unheeded round them. How patiently, how lovingly, skilled hands had toiled over these carvings, Ursule would think sadly; and for what? They were crumbling into decay, unseen, unpraised: even the sun was shut out from them, and all the careful labour was thrown away. She took back to Louis a pathetic picture of one or two such neglected corners, until he took quite an interest in them. He used to eagerly entreat her to go there, to pull up the tall weeds, to bring him back more exact descriptions. In truth, although he could not have accounted in words for the attraction these hidden nooks possessed for him, it was that he unconsciously traced in them an allegory of his own life, and that it comforted him to hear how the great, simple-minded builders of old knew that every

spot in God's house, should be beautiful, though it might be that mortal eye would never rest upon it, and that, where no other worship could be offered, the stones at least should cry out His praise.

Besides the cathedral, there was the sea. Louis knew all about that. On stormy nights he could hear the distant wail of the waves. Ursule used to tell him how the cliffs looked grey and mysterious in the twilight, or brightened into rosy flushes when the setting sun left a glorious trail upon the waters. He liked to hear of the varying aspect of the green waves; whether they rolled in with a motion, calm, mighty, undisturbed, and suffered the fishing-boats to spread their tawny canvas and rock peacefully upon the surface; or whether they scattered them far and wide, the angry breakers hurling themselves against the pier, and whitening it with clouds of driven foam. He liked especially to hear how, in the midst of all this turmoil, a little black speck would appear out of the mist which mingled sky and sea together, and, drawing nearer and nearer, would hold on its undaunted way through the great waves and against the opposing wind, until the steamer passed the pier into the harbour, and poured forth her freight of weary, pale-faced passengers. It was a great amusement to Louis when sometimes afterwards Ursule was able to point out to him the very people as they walked along sight-seeing, sure to spend a certain time in looking at the ivory carvings opposite.

All this Ursule could do, and she did it faithfully. But the part of Louis' existence, the want to which she could not minister, was an almost morbid longing to lessen the burden of his own helplessness. Ursule set Madame Sanson to scold him by the hour in vain. He acquiesced in all she said, but the long-

ing remained as strong as ever. He could not bear to think of the dead weight he was to his sister; he knew much better than she thought how hard it was sometimes for her to get what she wanted for him, but he would not grieve her by showing that he knew; that would only, as he was well aware, add tenfold to her trouble. But this it was which often, more than pain, made him restless; this it was that led him to toil painfully over the paper and paints, or lumps of clay which Pierre Renait, the son of the famous clay-moulder, brought to him—toil till his hands trembled, and the hot flush came out on his cheek, and Ursule was ready to cry for vexation. How badly she behaved to Pierre on these occasions! It was all his fault—all! He had no sense, no discretion, no perception; he could not be trusted for a moment to see what was destruction to Louis! The poor lad knew not what to do; for this little brown fury had before now been as gracious as possible to him when he had, by the very same means, succeeded in wiling away some hours of pain.

Pierre always mounted the stairs trembling; there was no knowing the mood in which he might find his queen. And it was a little hard when father, mother, and a hundred besides would have scouted with horror the idea of his falling in love with the daughter of Jean Lafon, the vagabond painter, to be so utterly scorned and made light of by the damsel herself. He thought mournfully that Ursule never seemed to consider him at all, except as a means of amusement for her beloved Louis. Nor did she. When he was entertaining, and Louis was bright, Pierre had a good chance of falling in for a smile, which set his heart bounding for an hour. If, unfortunately, Louis was weary and depressed, then Pierre was chased unceremoniously from the room, and left to make his way dismally

down the stairs, and to meditate upon the uncertainty of women's tempers. It was all very naughty of Ursule; but then, as Madame d'Aurigny complained, her manners were as yet by no means *comme il faut*.

When, however, Pierre Renait ventured to mount to his friend's room on the morning after the conversation between the brother and sister related in the preceding chapter, he found Ursule radiant. She flung down the work on which she was employed, and jumped up to meet him, clapping her hands.

'How long you have been in coming, Pierre!' she exclaimed. 'I have wanted you ever so much.'

'Wanted me, Mademoiselle?' stammered the young man, colouring from surprise and pleasure.

'It is partly owing to you, and it is delightful! Look at Louis; does he not look well? And he has done wonders!' Show it to Pierre, Louis; he deserves really to see it.'

'She thinks a great deal too much of it, Pierre,' said Louis, apologetically; 'it is a very little thing, and I remember you saw me beginning it. But you know I have done so little. Is there any chance? Will it do?'

'Do!' exclaimed Ursule with indignation.

But Louis was less sanguine. He watched his friend closely, with painful anxiety, aware of his own deficiencies, and jealous of the notion that Pierre might pretend to admire it for friendship's sake. He had not the least idea that there might be another reason to blind his eyes.

'Why, it is beautiful!' cried the young man, warmly; 'it is Mademoiselle to the life. Louis, lucky fellow! you will make your fortune!'

Louis shut his eyes and sank back upon his pillows, content. Ursule's smile deepened. If Pierre had ventured to think dif-

ferently, there is no knowing what would have become of him ; but there was genuine honesty in his tone, and the girl triumphed.

‘I told you so, Louis,’ she said ; ‘but of course Monsieur Pierre is a better judge. And we have to thank him for much. Indeed,’ she added, turning to him with a pretty little air of dignity which was new to her, ‘we are very, very much obliged to you.’

Pierre’s head swam ; such unwonted graciousness quite took away his breath ; he felt as he had not done since he had the fever, five years before. Yet it seemed to him as if it only mounted Ursule on a higher pedestal, and left him further off than ever

‘If Mademoiselle would like,’ he said timidly, ‘I might assist her in offering the little picture to those whose opinion is better worth having. Many, as you know, come to my father about works of art ; and although it is not our branch exactly, I—I think—I am sure it would soon find a purchaser.’

‘I do not want it to be sold,’ said Ursule, coming down from her heights and pouting a little. ‘I want to keep it.’

‘Do not listen to her,’ interrupted Louis eagerly ; ‘but thank you a hundred thousand times, Pierre. Take it with you—yes, by all means—I think, oh, if you can bring me back a few francs, and let me feel that I—I have earned them !—Ursule, I shall not be a log upon you any more.’

‘If I might——’ hurriedly began Pierre ; he was going to say that if he only might buy it himself it would be the choicest bit of treasure he had ever possessed, when Ursule interrupted him :

‘I insist—Pierre, I insist that it is not sold to any one who cannot appreciate it properly, who is not charming. I will never speak to you again, if you let it go otherwise. Do you understand?’

‘Yes, Mademoiselle, I understand you,’ said the young man, humbly.

‘And you promise?’

Pierre hesitated. ‘I promise,’ he said at last, ‘that no one shall have it who will not value it with his whole heart.’

‘That is right!’ exclaimed Ursule, gleefully. ‘My Louis, what would you do if you had not me to make conditions? And Pierre is really excellent; what can we do for him? *Tiens*, I have an idea! He shall see the fête to-morrow from our balcony. Madame d’Aurigny has her little party, and why should not we have our festivity above? You will come?—that is right. But I shall send you away now; Louis is tired, and must sleep. *Au revoir*, Monsieur Pierre: take great care of our treasure.’

Pierre went away in a whirl of delight. She had never treated him so confidentially before, never had been so kind, never, he thought, looked so bewitching. He held his charge tight—Ursule and her pigeons, which he was never to part with, though he spent his last *sou* upon its purchase. Nevertheless, in spite of his head being turned, he had enough sense remaining to understand that she would not be satisfied with his being the owner. He went, therefore, at once to an old man who worked for his father, and occasionally executed commissions on his own account, who knew also something of the value of pictures, and would be able to give an opinion as to what—to ordinary mortals who did not know Ursule—would be the worth of Louis’ maiden. He found Maître Moreau sitting in a stuffy little back room, engaged upon some delicate moulding, and in no good humour at being interrupted. He was surly mannered, and his greeting of Pierre was enough to daunt a less ardent inquirer. But Pierre in the presence of

Ursule, and Pierre with the outer world, were very different beings.

‘Good morning, Moreau ; I want a word of advice.’

‘I could give you plenty, only you would not take it,’ muttered the old man, crossly.

‘Who knows? Let’s hear it, at any rate.’

‘Take off these fripperies,’ touching with his lean forefinger some little ornaments rather ostentatiously displayed on Pierre’s watch-chain ; ‘go home, learn to bake clay, and not to disturb people when they are occupied.’

Pierre laughed. ‘Great thanks for small civilities. However, those are not what I require just at present. Just look up, if you please, from that sticky stuff, and tell me for how much this little water-colour ought to sell. There,’ he continued, holding it at arm’s length, and contemplating it with the deepest admiration, ‘if you are honest, you will acknowledge you have not seen so graceful a bit of work for a long time.’

Moreau glanced up quickly for an instant under his shaggy eyebrows.

‘I’ll give you half-a-napoleon for it.’

‘Will you, indeed?’ exclaimed the young man indignantly ; ‘who told you that it was for sale?—to you of all people in the world.’

‘If it is not for sale,’ said Moreau, coolly continuing his work, ‘there is no occasion for asking me what it is worth.’

‘But there is occasion, I tell you. *Allez!* I shall lose all patience presently. Moreau,’ he went on, changing his tone, ‘oblige me by informing me what a connoisseur in these matters would pay for such another as this? Not this itself, you understand—for, as I have already said, it is not for sale—but

one of the same style. 'Then I will depart, on my word of honour.'

'Depart, then, in the name of all that is provoking! And as to your sketch, if you poke it under the nose of every fool you meet as perseveringly as you have poked it under mine, at the end of a twelvemonth you may meet with one big enough to give you a napoleon for it.

'The old curmudgeon!' exclaimed Pierre, flinging himself out of the room indignantly. 'But I know his ways, and if he offered me ten francs for it, it is worth twice that; I will take them twenty francs to-morrow. What will Ursule say? I must be careful; she is so quick and so proud that every time she looks at me I shall think she has found out my secret; and if she did, the storm would be frightful; I should be compelled to restore it. Her looks sometimes seem as if they would wither one up; and yet how gentle she can be! Louis has made her eyes here like dove's eyes, and so they are to him. But I have heard that women are always strange to those they like; I hope it is so, for,' concluded poor Pierre, with a sigh, 'she is strange enough to me at times. Yet to-day—who knows?—to-day may be the beginning: so courage, my friend, courage; nothing is to be done without that.'

It is very easy work to call for one's weapons, but of no possible use if, when they come, they are allowed to slip out of one's fingers. That is just where Pierre's courage oozed away on the following morning when he mounted the oak staircase, with two little gold pieces clasped in his hand, and the picture safely locked away at home in a box. He began the ascent valiantly, two stairs at a time; and then he was seized with mortal dread of the encounter, and of Ursule's eyes looking through him and bringing his little fraud to light; so that he



dragged his steps as slowly after him as if he had been a criminal on the way to receive his sentence. Poor Pierre! Certainly his courtship was not running upon easy wheels. There was his mother, who had been reproaching him all the morning for deserting his own home on the day of the fête, and taunting him with his fondness for a little heretic, who had neither family, riches, nor even good looks to recommend her. There was his father, to whom nobody had ever dared to breathe a word of such monstrous behaviour on the part of his son; there was his married sister, who lectured like her mother, and the unmarried one, who made a mock at his confidences. There was Ursule herself treating him much as an eastern princess would treat a slave; and finally there was his own heart dragged in opposite directions. Pierre could only comfort himself with the idea that, with so many obstacles in the way, he was every day more closely approximating to the heroes of romance. He reflected what they would have done under the circumstances. Having arranged his hair very carefully before starting, it was not convenient to make any frantic attempts at tearing it, and he could only relieve himself by a tremendous thump upon the chest, which certainly had not the effect of making him feel more comfortable when he found himself in the room with the brother and sister.

It was Louis' turn to welcome him. Ursule was in the balcony, leaning over the railing, and watching the preparations in the street below.

'You are just in time, Pierre,' said the boy with a smile. 'I want to be helped out to see the gay sights which Ursule reports. Ursule, here is Pierre.'

'So I hear,' said the girl carelessly, without turning her head. 'Good day, Pierre.'

She was in one of her moods—Pierre knew it in a moment by her attitude; but the talisman he held in his hand gave him unusual confidence. He knelt down by Louis' couch. 'See here, my friend,' he said in an under-tone, 'are you content with your earnings?'

Louis looked at him with open eyes.

'Mine, all that!'

'You are pleased?'

'Twenty francs!'

'What are you two whispering about?' said Ursule, standing on the window-sill. 'Do you not know that it is very rude to whisper? Well, well, no fine excuses; do not flatter yourselves I care about your secrets. How could you tear yourself away from your gay friends, Monsieur Pierre?—you have a better view from your own apartments.'

'Mademoiselle forgets, perhaps, that she invited me,' said Pierre, confused, mortified, and piqued, all in one.

'No, I remember; but I certainly never thought you would have come.'

'How silly you are, both of you,' interrupted Louis impatiently; 'and, Ursule, all this time you ought to be thanking him. See!'

'Ah, he has sold the picture already;' and Ursule clapped her hands gleefully: 'think of that! Why; I never gained money like this.'

'How quickly you have got it—so much too! Pierre, is it really true; is it all right?'

The guilty Pierre coloured and stammered; but, as his danger, so his protection came from the quarter where he least expected it. Ursule answered for him tenderly.

'My Louis, you will always distrust yourself. I knew how it

would be; I knew what your beautiful little painting was worth. But, Pierre, I vexed you just now when you have been so good. You did not heed it, did you? You know how my tongue gallops away with me; you ought to pity me, indeed,' she continued with a comical little shrug, 'for what am I to do? When I am cross, I can't scold Louis, and it is so stupid to scold oneself.'

'You should never do that,' said Pierre, with a little blundering attempt at gallantry.

'No? Well, I am not so sure; but it is the pleasantest doctrine. Come,' she said, shaking off her momentary gravity, 'we must lead out Louis. I hear the music in the distance.'

Between them, the boy was half helped, half lifted, to the chair which his sister had put for him, and the three ensconced themselves in the little iron balcony to watch for the approaching procession—Pierre holding a great umbrella so as not only to shade Ursule, but conceal himself, and fervently hoping that no busy friends below would look up, recognise, and report to his father the reason why he had deserted his mother's guests.

Ursule's feelings on this fête-day were a mass of mingled sunshine and shadow. The day was delicious, fresh, keen, and sunny. Louis was well—unusually well, and in his highest spirits. Their worldly prospects, with this altogether unexpected and, to them, apparently inexhaustible source of wealth opening out, were peculiarly prosperous. Why was it not all sunshine? She had intended that it should be, and yet, foolish child, I am almost ashamed to write it of her, it sounds so naughty and discontented, the truth must be told, that she was annoyed because Madame d'Aurigny had not invited her to her reception in the *salon*. She wanted very much to know what

ladies talked about to one another. She had led a strangely independent, unconventional life, which had at least left her ignorant of the thousand wearisome common-places which make a part of every person's existence. In her simplicity she wanted to know about them. She would have liked, only for one ten minutes, to have sat humbly behind the three old people downstairs, and heard how they spoke in the unknown world of which she thought so often ; and she was very fierce with Madame for denying her this pleasure.

'May I come down, Madame, just to see your friends?' she had said innocently, when she had worked through the early morning, shaken and dusted and vigorously furbished up the old things in Madame's apartment, and dragged the heavy great chair down the stairs, bump, bump, at every step.

All this she had done, and then she asked for her crumb of reward.

But no, certainly,' Madame said, without a touch of compunction in her voice. 'It would not be *comme il faut*,' she had gone on to explain. She, the poor artist's daughter, could not be invited to meet Madame Grignon and Madame Larousse, who had once moved in a circle of society so high that it was not possible for Ursule even to reach it in imagination. 'I should not hurt them,' the girl said, defiantly ; and she had gone away with indignation in her heart. It was this strange worldly problem, which had never before come in her way, that troubled her thoughts as she sat silent under Pierre's umbrella in the balcony. She was not good enough to meet Madame's friends. But why? The young republican frowned and bit her lips at the idea of the balcony from which she was shut out—the balcony down below, in which the three old women, faded and wizened, sat clinging to the shadow of their fancied dignities

and solemnly eating chocolate. It was far more pleasant to look at the group over their heads. Ursule's graceful little lithe figure in the unfailing dark dress, it is true, but with snowy collar and cuffs to freshen it, and the ribbon fillet round her head; Pierre, dark-eyed, sallow, animated; and the pale earnest face of the lame boy, with watchful eyes, keenly seeking a new excitement; all set off by the bright bit of scarlet cloth which, Protestants as they were, good Madame Sanson insisted upon hanging over the balcony. Some of the neighbours, standing at the door of their houses, looked up, smiled and nodded with a good-humoured shrug at sight of Pierre, who, reddening as he caught their glances, kept back as far under the shadow of the umbrella as he could, while Ursule, equally unconscious of him and of them, clasped her hands upon the balcony railing, and looked out with eyes which were trying to pierce that new problem which the world had just placed before her.

The brilliant procession came slowly down the street, pausing every now and then at the different stations, the altars decked with green boughs which had been erected in its course. There were soldiers, and banners, and canopies of bright fluttering ribbons carried by young girls; there was a body of the newly confirmed, the girls in their white dresses and veils; there were the ecclesiastics in their gorgeous many-coloured vestments; and with the guns, and the music, and the moments when all the bystanders simultaneously knelt in the street, it could not fail to be impressive. Louis watched it intently, more intently than either of his companions, and sank back with a sigh of relief as the last straggler disappeared down the street and Madame Sanson came bustling into the room.

'Was there ever such a fête? Did you think there could be anything half so beautiful upon earth? That little fat man next

monseigneur waddled frightfully, it is true; but then what would you have?—they cannot all be angels. Ah, I remember going to a fête myself, all in white and lovely. They would not have me now, though I flatter myself I am a great deal better inside than I used to be. All the same, that will not serve for the angels down below here: one must have a figure and a complexion to make any show among them. And there was that silly little Annette, with her wreath all awry. Gabrielle Drouet was the most charming of them all—not a hair out of place, not a fold disturbed, and moving like a queen. I called Sanson to see it; but the soup was just simmering, and he would not leave it even for a moment. What will become of him?—that is the question that rests in my throat like a bone. What will become of him,’ continued Madame Sanson, puckering her rosy round face into as grave an expression as it could be brought to assume, ‘if he cannot leave his cooking when all the holiness in our town is passing by? It is frightful! What dost thou think, little one?’

Ursule was still leaning over the heavy iron railing, and Madame Sanson took it for granted that she was absorbed in tracking the course by which the passing splendour had disappeared. She was the more petrified when the girl, without turning her head or changing her position, answered pettishly,

‘I think he was quite right.’

‘Ursule!’ said Louis.

In a moment she was kneeling by his side. ‘I can’t think what has got into me to-day,’ she said penitently; ‘I am always saying what is wrong. Dear Madame, I know it is beautiful to you: I did not mean to vex you. I will go and preach to Monsieur for an hour, if you would like it. But, my Louis,’ laying her brown cheek against his white one, and whispering, ‘it does

not satisfy me. Is it wicked, do you think, to be different from other people? Every one else looked so pleased.'

'I thought it beautiful,' said the boy, with a sigh.

'And so it must have been. It is all my fault; and these troublesome fancies, which will come, come. You don't have them because you are good, and when I am quite close to you they fly away from me also. Hush! you are looking tired; we will lift you in.'





### CHAPTER III.

#### ON THE QUAL.

We live not in our moments or our years;  
The present we fling from us as the rind  
Of some sweet future.

R. C. TRENCH.

**T**HREE days after the fête, Madame d'Aurigny and Ursule held a grave conference in the *salon* of the former lady.

Louis, patiently lying on his couch up-stairs, wondered to what it could relate, since it had been heralded by certain signs of importance which were quite unprecedented. Madame Sanson had ascended the black staircase as the bearer of a small elegantly folded missive, in which Madame d'Aurigny prayed Mademoiselle Ursule Lafon to do her the favour to descend, she being desirous to consult her upon an affair of moment. Ursule went off into a fit of merry laughter, when with some pains she had succeeded in deciphering this formal document; Madame Sanson, on the contrary, generally full of contempt for her lodger's little weaknesses, fidgeted, looked grave, and finally scolded Ursule roundly for her want of proper respect.

'But she sees me every day: why should she take all this trouble?'



‘That is nothing to thee. People do not take trouble without reason ; leave that to her. Since she desires it, be serious and steady.’

She was so evidently anxious on the subject, that Ursule schooled herself into sobriety, and went down-stairs prepared, as she whispered to Louis, to drop three unexceptionable curtseys, and not speak unless she was spoken to. But, in spite of her words, the girl could not help feeling a little curious, and Louis still more so. He and Madame Sanson remained in the room together after Ursule had obediently descended, his old friend sitting with her mouth resolutely pursed up, as if the secret were ready to fly out of it at a moment’s notice. Perceiving this, he abstained from questioning, and went on sketching after some scarcely formed fancy with a bit of charcoal which he held in his hand. He had passed a night of suffering, and dark rims round his eyes made them look unnaturally large. Madame Sanson could not withdraw her own from the calm pure young face, and with her head still full of angels would have been scarcely astonished to see him transformed into one before her. She had always stoutly maintained, to the intense scandal of the more orthodox among her friends, that he was as good as any saint ; but, this afternoon, she placed him among the angels. He meanwhile, quite unconscious, was meditating in a quiet orderly way—which, partly from natural temperament and partly from the long discipline of suffering, was as unlike as possible to his sister’s wayward, roving imaginings—upon Ursule and the restlessness she had lately displayed. Thinking it just possible that Madame Sanson might throw light upon the subject, he asked her whether she had noticed it. The old woman was terribly taken aback by this question, which placed her secret in serious jeopardy.

‘What is that you say—restless? Well, well, it is possible: girls are often so. It fatigues them to be always staying and moping in the same place. She wants a change; she ought to go away for a little distraction.’

‘Go away!’ repeated Louis, with a shiver, ‘go away from me!’

‘Yes, yes,’ said Madame quickly, ‘for a little time, you know, that is all. What will you do when she wants to get married? A young girl like her won’t be content to live up here always. Perhaps that may be at the bottom of her contrary ways now.’

Louis laughed out at this, a boyish laugh of disbelief.

‘No?’ said Madame, sagaciously. ‘Well, well, we shall see, we shall see; stranger things happen. Now, I could tell you something about something which would surprise you—there, as if I had not as nearly as possible let out all Madame’s intentions! Ah! what is coming to me. It keeps dropping out from my mouth as if I had a mouthful of peas; and in a general way, though I may be an old fool, it is certain no one can accuse me of over-talking. I must descend, I must indeed, or it will be out before I know it, as surely as a chick from the shell.’

‘No, no; sit there, where I can see you, and you need not speak much. Only tell me—ought Ursule to go away? Am I selfish?’

Madame Sanson rapidly nodded her head in answer to the first question, and shook it with greater vehemence at the second—the only means of expression which she felt remained to her.

Louis’ brows contracted, and the sweet young face looked troubled. He half raised himself on his arm, and spoke rapidly and with some agitation:

‘Dear Madame Sanson, you know our circumstances; no one

knows them better than you who have been so good to us. And you know about young girls, what is right, what they should be. For me it does not matter; wherever I was it would be the same: I can but lie here and be a burden, I suppose. But we won't speak of that—you shake your head; and we will conclude that I have nothing to do with the affair—only about Ursule. Ah, Madame, it has been so hard for her to have no mother, no father even,' added the lad in a hesitating voice, 'and to be sacrificed here to me. How can she learn all the things women ought to know?'

'She is too independent for a woman; that is true,' returned Madame Sanson, continuing to shake her head, as if by this means she had found a vent for her feelings.

'And yet, how can she be otherwise?'

'Mademoiselle ought to be with other women;,' said Madame, decisively.

'It is good, therefore, for her to be with Madame d'Aurigny,' Louis said, after a moment's pause. Then with a half smile, 'But she will not submit herself.'

'Her spirit will be broken some day, without doubt; it is not intended that a woman should have spirit.'

'No? My poor Ursule! Must it be broken? Should it not rather be curbed and trained?'

'All very fine, Monsieur Louis, but who is to do it? You can make those little bits of paper take what colouring you please; but a girl's heart!—that's another thing.'

'I know,' said the boy sadly. 'But, dear Madame, think of all she has had against her! Who has she to guide her? How can I help her? What will become of her when——'

Louis stopped. Madame looked at him reverently.

'One would think you were ever so much older,' said she.

He did not answer her for a moment ; then it was to say with a faint smile, ' Perhaps my life is gathered into fewer years.'

'She won't be forsaken,' said Madame heartily, the tears standing in her kind old eyes ; 'the good God will take care of you and of her to the end, never doubt it : you might be Protestants fifty times over before they would get me to believe anything different. There now, don't talk any more, but try to go to sleep. I hear Sanson calling me, and I must go down all those back-tormenting stairs. How I wish we had a nice compact little staircase instead ! Don't be thinking yourself into a headache : there will be good in the end for all you poor young things, heretics or not,' added the old woman in a panting whisper as she descended the stairs, taking each step heavily with the same foot, 'Saints preserve us, what would Père Roget say if he heard me !'

Louis did not obey his old friend's injunctions, and the dark shade under his eyes grew darker, as he thought, thought, thought of Ursule, her faults and her loveliness. Pain and weariness had been the teachers sent to train his mind when of other training there was little. Long ago, young as he was, life had stood out before him as no problem, but part of a great whole—something not only to be accepted, but used. No one, not even Ursule, knew what the patience had cost him, which appeared by others to be worn so easily that it scarcely seemed like patience at all, but rather perfect contentment. No one knew how, through all the weariness and depression of pain, hope would continually spring up with some of the vigour which is inseparable from boyhood—how resolutely the brave young spirit had striven to put it by, to wrestle with his longings, to fit himself to the cross, and to accept it as a blessing. Ursule believed there was never any one so good ; but, with all

her love and admiration, it seemed to her that she and Louis could never look at life from the same level. To her it was like a veiled beautiful figure standing in the distance, with a smiling face and a lap full of treasures, holding those bright future years which were to come dancing and go out dancing, to make room for others only more beautiful still. And though she longed vaguely to be good, and liked good people and good deeds, it was a dreamy kind of longing, very far removed from any real perception of what that goodness should be, of the daily struggle, the self-denial, the patience, the thankful heart. Temper and patience failed often enough now, when some little passage at arms with Madame crossed her will, and she scarcely professed to be dutiful to her father. She held her religion because it was the religion of the family; but, as far as any higher motive went, she would as soon have held anything else, and her taste preferred the bright and gorgeous ceremonial of the Church of the country to the cold and unadorned service held once a week in the 'Temple.' Yet, though so much in her character seemed anchorless, her nature was not one to be very readily led. She was somewhat reticent in her attachments, and jealous of the smallest attempt at coercion. Loving, warm-hearted, generous, faithful, and true, she was also wilful, proud, passionate, and impatient, and as yet deficient in those principles which only could give hope that the brighter side of her character would in time predominate.

Louis' meditations came near some of these conclusions—painfully near, it seemed; for with a sigh he passed his hand over his forehead as if his task had been too heavy for him, and lay languidly back, feeling relief in the soft summer air which stole in at the window, cool and refreshing, from the sea. Without the breeze the day would have been oppressively sultry. There

was a drone of insects, an occasional rumble of a cart, a suppressed murmur of street sounds. Through all these he began to detect a high-pitched note or two, gradually becoming more shrill, which assured him that the interview down-stairs was not altogether of a peaceful nature. He listened as intently as he could to the unintelligible sounds. A quarrel between Madame and Ursule was, as has been said, no uncommon event; but he felt unreasonably impatient at its happening now, when he had just been longing for Ursule to be more gentle with Madame. By-and-by he fancied that the voices grew more composed; nevertheless it was evident that an altercation of some kind had taken place, and though he roused himself to give his unfailing smile of welcome to Ursule when, more slowly than usual, she came up the stairs and into the room, his face wore an anxious and wearied expression which she perceived in a moment.

She did not, however, at once allude to it, but asked what had become of Madame Sanson.

‘She stayed as long as she could.’

‘She has tired you, then, Louis?’

‘Not at all,’ said he, putting on a comic air of dignity; ‘we talked philosophy, Madame and I, and it was very improving.’

Ursule shook her head. ‘When I go away from you, everything goes wrong.’

‘Oh, the vanity ——’

‘No, no; it is as I say, is it not?’

She spoke so imploringly that Louis glanced wonderingly in her face. He put his thin hand into hers.

‘There is no need for me to tell you, my Ursule, that with you here everything is better.’

‘I said so, I said so,’ exclaimed she, laughing and crying at once. ‘We will always be together; no one can place your

pillows like me; no one can read or do anything; no one shall!’

She fluttered about him as she spoke, putting some of her words into practice, but so absently that Louis underwent a good deal of discomfort in the process, and would have preferred his pillows being left as Madame had arranged them. He had not the heart to say so, however, and patiently bore the infliction—the more so, because every moment he expected something to be told him which might explain her disjointed words and actions; and she was at all times so ready to pour her little confidences into his ear, and to treasure the veriest trifles for his amusement, that it seemed unnecessary to question her. Nevertheless, to his wonder, she said not a word about the conversation downstairs, but rather seemed by a restless flow of little inconsequent speeches, and by an apparent incapability of sitting still, to be bent upon warding off any reference to the subject. Louis watched and waited until he felt almost a shrinking difficulty in touching upon what she so persistently avoided.

‘Ursule——’ he began, at last.

‘Hark! did you hear anything? I must run down-stairs and see whether Madame does not want me.’

She was gone before he could stop her; and when she came back it was in a great bustle, to say that she was going as far as the harbour to fetch something for Madame. Louis was not to be put off again. He caught her by the sleeve, held her fast, and asked with an amused face whether her going at once was of such importance.

Ursule’s truthfulness barred her from an evasive answer.

‘As to that—no; but I have really promised to go there this afternoon.’

‘Well, you shall go, but not this very moment. I have never

heard why you were summoned with all that ceremonial to Madame, and I am frightfully curious.'

Louis watched for an answer in vain, for his sister stood silent.

'Is anything wrong?' he asked anxiously.

'No, no, indeed!'

'Only you would rather tell me nothing about it. Is it so, Ursule?'

She glanced quickly at him to discover whether he was hurt by her silence, but meeting only a look of unbroken trust, said quietly,

'I do not know how I can ask it, but it is true that I shall be very grateful to you if you will not say anything to me. Madame wanted to ask a question, and—and I answered it; that really was all.'

She spoke in a constrained, measured voice, very unlike herself; but she could not have done otherwise. She had shared every thought with Louis since babyhood, until now, and she was sufficiently unreasonable to feel sore and annoyed with both Madame d'Aurigny and their good old landlady, for having plotted together the little scheme which, she was ashamed to remember, had seemed for a few moments so bright and enticing. Louis answered hesitatingly,

'But—you did not quarrel with her?'

'No; why?'

'I thought your voices sounded loud.'

'Only Madame's. She was vexed,' said Ursule, more frankly than she had yet spoken; 'but she meant to be kind.'

'Then you thanked her?'

'O Louis, you pay so much attention to my conduct with Madame! How do you know there was anything to thank her for? Well, yes, I did. But I am not going to answer ques-



tions, I tell you—not even looks. I am going to the *quai* for a little fish for Monsieur, and all you are to do meanwhile is to forget every single thing about this afternoon, and to imagine you have spent it in sleeping.’

Louis smiled, a weary, puzzled smile, and her heart smote her as she ran down the stairs. Madame Sanson pounced upon her from the little glazed apartment below. She was in a flutter of indignation, which entirely prevented her hearing anything Ursule might have to urge in defence, and scarcely allowed herself time to speak intelligibly.

‘Such folly—such ingratitude—such waste of opportunities! I would not believe Sanson when he told me. Is it true? No; I will not believe it. Do you know what it is you are throwing away?—and all that I have gone through.’

Ursule had no opportunity of answering, but at this last sentence she drew herself up indignantly. Madame was not advancing her cause.

‘I said so much for you—I gave her no peace’ (Madame did not say that she had, moreover, promised to advance whatever money was required for the girl, but it was the truth); ‘it is too provoking of you! I can’t believe you understand to what you are saying no. You have never been away: you don’t figure to yourself the delights—the movement, the gaiety at the railway station, the trains and the passengers. Should I not like to be always going backwards and forwards! When I make a journey of the kind—it is not often, but when it does occur, I say to Sanson, “Ah, Jules, *mon ami*, this is different, this is life;” one is on good terms with all the world. And you, you will not go! Such a paradise of a country; such a garden of fruit-trees; such streets, and shops, and factories at Rouen! You will not go? It is inconceivable.’

Madame was thoroughly put out and annoyed. For a length of time Madame d'Aurigny had been in the habit of indulging in vague dreams about a little journey into the country. A relation of hers was married to an avocat at Rouen, and had more than once asked Madame to spend a short time there with her. She was half inclined to go, and half terrified at the prospect of the undertaking; and it was Madame Sanson who had first thought of Ursule's going as her companion, and then had really given her no rest until she wrote to the avocat's wife and obtained a ready answer and hospitable extension of the invitation to Ursule—Madame d'Aurigny thinking that she would thus obtain a companion who would take a great deal off her hands upon the journey, and Madame Sanson agreeing privately to pay the girl's expenses, while, apparently, the patronage rested in the hands of her first-floor lodger.

And Ursule had absolutely refused!

I am not sure that there can be anything more annoying to kindly-natured people than to have their pet schemes for the good of some one in whom they are interested upset by the obstinacy of the person himself. It is such a gratuitous hindrance. Other obstacles they will meet with their accustomed good humour; but this is unpardonable. Madame repeated in a tone of the utmost irritation,

'You will not go!'

'Dear Madame, I cannot.'

Ursule was leaning over the back of a chair, with her face turned away from her old friend; but something in the tone of her voice struck the latter, and made her go up to her, take her head in both hands, and turn it to the light. A tear twinkled in each eye.

'Ah-h-h!' cried Madame, triumphantly, instantly dropping

into the chair, with all her good humour restored. 'Now I begin to see. You would like to go after all ; to be sure, to be sure, that is as it should be. I always run my head against a post when, contrary to my own convictions, I listen to Sanson, who is a good man in his way, but without discernment. And now we will come to the inside of the matter. You wish to go, I wish you to go, Madame wishes you to go ; what more can be needed ?'

Ursule's eyes flashed indignantly round upon her.

'Is Louis not to be thought of?'

'And what possible harm can come to him?'

 answered Madame calmly. 'Am not I here? And should I not take care to see more to his comfort if you were absent? Bah, bah ! if that is all, we shall do well enough.'

The girl shook her head.

'I acknowledge that I should like to see all the fine things you tell me about, for they must be beautiful,' she said, simply ; 'but it is of no use. Louis and I have never been separated ; I cannot leave him.'

'Now you will enrage me again,' said Madame, casting up her hands ; 'and if Sanson returns from his promenade and finds me out of temper, nobody knows what may happen. Answer me one question, What does the poor boy himself say to all this fuss ?'

'He? He does not know.'

'You have told him nothing?'

 said the old woman in shrill astonishment.

'But no, certainly ! Why, you know Louis by this time ; you know he would fret himself into a fever if he thought he was the cause of my not going. I would not have him learn it for all the world.'

‘But how could you help it?—was it not very hard to keep counsel?’

‘Not so very,’ said Ursule, laughing; ‘the tongue need not say all that the heart contains.’

‘It says a great deal more sometimes, as to that, Mademoiselle. But you may rest assured that I shall tell him at the first opportunity, and see what he says to these ridiculous ideas.’

Ursule put her hands upon her old friend’s shoulders.

‘You will do nothing of the kind,’ she said, looking steadily at her with eyes from which every trace of sadness had vanished. ‘Until to-day I never knew you could be cross and unkind. I say solemnly that, if you tell Louis one word of the matter, I will never speak to you again—never, never, never! Think of that! What would become of you, I should like to know, if you had not me to tease you? I will not hear another word; but instead of my going away, you and Monsieur shall come to a little feast with us to-morrow, if Louis is well. You will; will you not? And you will show me the way to mix Monsieur’s favourite salad. Do not fear; Louis’ cleverness is making us quite rich, and, remember, you have promised!’

‘What have I promised?’ soliloquised Madame, arranging a sort of loose, flapping concern which decorated her head, and had been seriously disarranged by Ursule’s parting hug. ‘Do what one will, that is a terrible child for always having her own way.’

Ursule sped along as if her errand engrossed all her thoughts, nodding gaily to such of the shopkeepers as, tempted by the bright beauty of the afternoon and that instinctive love of open-air enjoyment which belongs to the French people, were lounging or sitting at the doors of their shops; but not lingering to exchange greetings with any of them. They had known her since

childhood, and were indulgent of the free, independent ways which they would not have permitted in their own daughters; though, to do her justice, however impatient of restraint she might be, not a word of blame as to unmaidenly conduct in speech or action had ever been imputed to her.

She went to the *halle*, bought the fish destined for Monsieur Sanson's consumption, and emerged on the side of the building facing the quay. Once having executed her commission, her hurry seemed to evaporate, and she loitered near the brink of the harbour, watching a ponderously built lugger being hauled in to discharge her contents. Clumsy and ugly as the vessel looked, even under the last rays of a gloriously setting sun, which not only made the grey clouds radiant, but touched the most ordinary objects with grand effects of light and shadow, there was a shade of romance in the name carefully painted on the stern—the 'Jeune Marguerite,' that took Ursule's fancy. Wondering who was the 'Jeune Marguerite,' how long the pretty name had clung to the battered old vessel, whether the neatness with which it had evidently been but lately repainted spoke of hope fulfilled, or hope deferred, or sad remembrance, her thoughts went back by their usual inevitable sequence to Louis. Inheriting something of her father's artistic genius, she gathered in a moment all the principal points of the busy scene before her for his benefit: the long, sharp shadows on the dusty road—the quaint red-tiled roofs flaming under the sunbeams—piles of cordage—bales of goods—mountains of baskets—groups of gesticulating sailors, in caps of vivid scarlet—green water lapping ceaselessly under the discoloured wall—boats fidgiting round the larger vessels—the 'Jeune Marguerite' lumbering wearily alongside. Three women standing near her, with snowy caps and bright brass milk-cans,

were comparing notes upon their fortune at the market ; a little child, belonging to one of the number, feasted upon a great handful of cherries. Ursule began to sing softly to herself ; the elder women were too much engaged to hear it ; but the child stopped eating, listened, and finally threw her a cherry for a reward. She would not come nearer, however, though Ursule smiled and beckoned ; but, as soon as the song ceased, returned to her occupation of cherry-eating. Ursule added the trim little creature, with her round cheeks and eager eyes, to her picture for Louis, thinking that, if she could make him see the easy, childish attitude and the dangling fruit, he might contrive to sketch a likeness.

Then the thought forced itself upon her against which she had been fighting all the afternoon—how much that was new and beautiful she might bring back to interest him if she went away for that week's holiday. She was fierce with herself for the very fact of having to battle with the longing at all ; frightened at the force with which it returned upon her. In these days, when comparatively the quietest lives have in them a degree of movement unknown in old times, it is difficult to conceive an existence so uneventful as hers had been. It seemed to her that to make this projected expedition would be to enter upon a world of delight. Imagination painted it in the most glowing colours ; to no one on the earth could Rouen prove so charming as she pictured it. Until now she had not been able to think the matter quietly over by herself. When she had descended into the *salon*, it was to be received by Madame d'Aurigny sitting in dignity in the borrowed great oak chair, with her hands folded before her, and so full of the importance of the communication she was about to make, that Ursule's small stock of patience had difficulty in meeting the demands made upon it. It was

long before she could gather more than that a great favour was about to be bestowed upon her, and this she was suspicious would resolve itself into one of Madame's peculiarly one-sided favours.

But as, little by little, the project was disclosed, she was lost in a perfect maze of overpowering delight. It seemed as if a bit of the curtain which shut out a beautiful unknown world were to be lifted. She was very young, very inexperienced, and novelty meant enjoyment. Two or three moments of this dream of happiness, and she remembered Louis. How could she have forgotten? What had she been thinking of? Down went the curtain again; a chill crept over everything; her face, which had been so radiant and joyous, grew blank. Madame marvelled why, in the midst of broken words of thanks, she suddenly stopped and shook her head; but when she gathered that she was absolutely declining the proposal, her indignation knew no bounds. It was no wonder that the shrill, angry ravings penetrated to Louis overhead. Instead of touching Ursule, it made her bitter, feeling, as she did, as if the offer had been only a mockery; angry, too, with herself for having for an instant allowed herself to dream of leaving Louis, and still more for feeling that she actually wanted to go, and that the giving it up was a sharp disappointment. It was tender, unselfish love which made her realize what it would cost him to let her go, and heroically turn away from her bright visions; but poor Ursule was very far from possessing the self-control that was needed to bear patiently with Madame's words. Reverence for age, which would have helped many young girls, seemed entirely wanting or undeveloped in her, and the scolding went on so vehemently on either side that it was a wonder their quarrels were ever made up. This last had ended in a sort of truce.

Madame exhausted her words, and Ursule felt she had been ungrateful. Then came her talk with Louis, her lecture from Madame Sanson, and her meditations upon the quay.

At last she shook herself out of a kind of dream, and turned homewards. The women and the little child, the milk-pails and cherries, had departed; the sunlight was fast fading; one bright gleam still lingered lovingly upon the stern of the old vessel, and lit up the fresh white letters, 'La Jeune Marguerite.' All the way home the words danced before Ursule's eyes.







## CHAPTER IV.

### A QUARREL AND ITS RESULT.

*Fal.*—This chair shall be my state.

KING HENRY IV.

**L**OUIS was nearly as much excited as Ursule on the following morning by the preparations which it was necessary to make for the little feast. He insisted upon her pulling about the scanty furniture, changing the position of the pictures, and bringing in fresh green branches with which to decorate the stove, and certainly by his criticisms rather hindered her than otherwise; she taking it all with perfect good humour, and something of tender motherly love that was touching when the relations between them were considered.

‘So?’ said she, standing aside that he might judge whether the table with its snowy covering was placed exactly in the right angle.

‘A little more this way. The red house is prettier than the other, for a view.’

‘Monsieur will not greatly regard the view,’ said Ursule, laughing. ‘O Louis, nothing but that idea of mine about the salad would have dragged him up all those stairs. Since you saw him, he has grown more of a porpoise than ever.’

‘Where can he sit?’

‘That is perplexing me,’ she answered, glancing ruefully round.

‘He will break down the chairs.’

‘It is certain; and, moreover, one is broken already.’

‘Ursule, we have forgotten!—the oak chair!’

The girl clapped her hands. ‘Where are my wits? It is that, of course—the very thing, and it had quite gone out of my head. I should have brought it up the day after the fête, only Madame looked so proud and happy in it that I had not the heart to remove it.’

‘She could have it again,’ called out Louis, always anxious to prevent disagreement. But his sister did not hear him; she was already half-way down the stairs, bent upon the recovery of the borrowed property.

As ill-luck would have it, Madame was sitting in the very chair when its owner entered the room, and neither face nor attitude looked propitious. Her indignation with Ursule had increased rather than subsided; for although she might originally have been of many minds about going to Rouen, since an obstacle had been placed in her way, she was persuaded it was the one pleasure without which she could not exist, and Ursule, as the means of disappointment, incurred her severest displeasure, without a thought of sympathy for what the refusal had evidently cost the girl. Her favourite mode of retaliation was to take no notice of her entrance, and she sat rigid and immovable, while Ursule, who always forgot the storms as soon as they were over, preferred her request as inoffensively as she could.

‘I am desolated to disarrange Madame, but we—my brother and I—have friends with us to-day.’ She was proceeding to

mention who the friends were, but prudently forbore, remembering that the Sanson name was apt to cause offence. She waited for some notice to be taken of the little announcement, which to her sounded very imposing; but finding no answer was vouchsafed, she went gaily on: 'And the truth is, that we have not chairs enough, so that I am forced to ask Madame to let me take away this,' laying her hand upon its carved back as she spoke.

'What!' cried the old lady, sharply.

'The chair, Madame—our chair.'

Madame d'Aurigny rose up in a fever of indignation. '*Dites, donc*, have you come here to insult me? Not content with your infamous behaviour yesterday, your ingratitude towards me—me, who have been your best friend—not content with that, do you desire to drag away the very chair I sit upon?'

'But it was only lent!' exclaimed Ursule, confounded.

'Do you then require the eyes to see that such an article as this belongs of right to the *salon*? If it has been all this time up-stairs with you, it proves only that the people of this house have no idea of the fitness of things. Do not suppose that I shall allow it to be removed.'

'Madame!'

'Understand me, I shall not, I say!' cried Madame d'Aurigny, losing her dignity in rage, and raising her tones in a shrill crescendo.

'It is the chair in which Louis sits: you do not know what you say—you must be mad,' said the girl, scornfully.

'Mad! Hear her—the insolent! And this is Madame Sanson's pattern demoiselle, the excellent sister, the admirable companion! Yes, yes, yes, this is she! But here you shall not remain; leave the apartment, do you hear?'



*Ursule demanding the Old Oak Chair from Madame d'Aurigny. P. 54*



‘Not without the chair. You are a bad, wicked woman to want to keep it from Louis,’ cried Ursule, in a passion.

‘I repeat, it is not for people such as you : you may take one of the others in its stead. There!’ said Madame, calming down a little.

‘I will not. Bah ! the chair is for us, and you shall not steal it.’

‘Never approach me again !’ said Madame d’Aurigny.

‘Rest assured, I will not.’

‘Go !’

‘The chair, Madame.’

In the midst of a torrent of words, which burst forth in answer, Ursule pulled the object of dispute towards the door. Madame would fain have sat upon it, and so impeded its removal ; but the girl was young, strong, and angry, and she feared an ignominious discomfiture. She could only repeat in a voice half choked with rage,

‘You shall never again be admitted ; I endure this for the last time.’

‘If Madame’s is *comme-il-faut* behaviour,’ retorted Ursule, with crimson face, ‘she has at least taught me what to avoid.’

Madame slammed the door. Ursule dragged the great chair with difficulty up the stairs, her first glow of triumph fading into a sore, hurt sensation of shame. Never, in all her experience of quarrels, had there been a scene like this. She left the chair upon the highest landing, and ran in to Louis ; and it was proof of the disturbance of her feelings that, instead of being careful to spare him from any share in the worry, she felt the longing to pour everything into his ear irresistible.

‘I have brought it,’ she said, in a hurried voice ; ‘but I am never going near her again.’

‘Ursule!’

‘It is true, it is quite true,’ she went on passionately; ‘she is a wicked woman; and it humiliates me to lose myself, and say the things I cannot help saying.’

‘You can help calling her so wrong a name,’ said the boy, gravely, but still continuing to smooth the brown head laid upon his pillow, as if by that tender action he could quiet the angry whirl within.

‘No one could bear it,’ she said, excusing herself a little.

‘It is so hard, is it? But still——’

‘Ah, Louis, you cannot judge;’ then, fearing she had hurt him, she continued quickly, ‘It is we women, you know, who quarrel with one another.’

‘Yes, indeed, since the Olympian days!’

‘I know you want me to think about it’s being wrong, but I am not good like you—I never shall be, and I don’t feel the wrongness. It seems to me that, when one meets injustice, one ought to be angry—to resist. I hate it: it makes my heart burn, and then I say so;—why not? It is not for that I am sorry, but for the scolding that I do, just like Madame herself. It makes me despise myself, it is so little!’

Louis was painfully sensitive about giving advice. His pale face flushed. ‘You don’t keep the reins over yourself, is that it? I fancy you and Madame must be something alike; but that is nothing, because you know she has a right to expect forbearance.’ He hesitated, then drew out the little French Bible, which was always under his pillow, and, turning the pages rapidly, made Ursule look at the lines to which he pointed.

She looked and shook her head. ‘I suppose there are many good people who really feel like that: I cannot.’

‘You can do many disagreeable things for my sake, Ursule.’

‘Anything!’ she answered quickly, turning upon him a face full of love. ‘But this would be all for myself. No? What do you mean? Ah, I see: yes, if one could realize that object, I can understand how it would make the hard things possible; but I do not realize it, or only a little—not as you do. I wish I could really be good. I wish it often, and it never, never comes.’

An English girl would have more readily taken it for granted that the goodness would ‘come’ some day, and the words sounded light; but there was a ring of earnestness and humility about them from which a more experienced and a less anxious observer than Louis would have drawn comfort. It was after speeches of this kind, however, that the boy, older in everything but years than his sister, longed most earnestly for some person to help and advise them, and was most conscious of his own incapacity. All Madame Sanson’s troubles and conscience-pricks were carried to confession, and she felt, on her return, to use her own expression, as light as an egg-shell. She had a simple confiding faith, never disturbed by side-winds of doubt, seldom with questions of what she ought or ought not to do: if such a question embarrassed her, she packed it carefully on one side, in a sort of mental receptacle which corresponded with the pocket of her dress, until the appointed Saturday evening, when she found her way to the dimly lighted church, and yielded up a somewhat heterogeneous collection, to be disposed of implicitly as Monsieur le Curé directed. Without such a resource she was helpless, and would only have been far more bewildered than Ursule if the wild questioning thoughts and longings that flitted through the girl’s brain had been revealed to her. Her husband, on his part, like the majority of his class, was merely tolerant, not approving of the power of the priests, recognizing



it as something to be feared, and, for that very reason, secretly delighted when by some means—not of his own creating—it received a check, but equally unwilling to take a prominent part in opposition. Certainly, no help was to be derived from Monsieur or Madame Sanson; Madame d'Aurigny was yet more completely out of the question; and Louis replaced his little Bible beneath his pillow with a sigh which cut Ursule to the heart. Up she sprang with one of her bewildering changes of mood.

‘O Louis, why do you let me stay chattering, when I have more things to do than my head will hold? and in ten minutes they will be here!’

She darted hither and thither, working in earnest, putting finishing-touches to her arrangements with a light and graceful hand, and contriving to infuse a festive air over the homely, unpretending little room. A long interval elapsed between the creak announcing that Monsieur’s foot was planted on the first step, and the great sigh which told that the ascent was completed; and when he came puffing into the room, his wife, on tiptoe behind him, nodding with good-humoured delight at the brother and sister, he sank speechless into the great chair with a weight that shook the house.

‘Here we are, children,’ cried Madame, bestowing a pat on the head upon her husband, by way of assisting the recovery of his breath; ‘but truly it will not be well for the stability of the house if Sanson often makes these excursions. Courage, *mon ami*, you will be better presently.’

Monsieur, an enormous man with iron-grey stubbly hair, and dressed in a loose brown alpaca coat, feebly shook his head, implying that he was not yet in a condition to exert himself, and Madame rattled on cheerily.

‘How nice she has made everything look, the little one! Ah! she can be clever when she will. I will sit here close to Louis, and you there. Jules’s breath is coming, so we can begin.’

Madame had too much delicacy to have offered any assistance for this little banquet; and, as Ursule distrusted her own capacity for pleasing Monsieur too greatly to trust entirely to her own powers, she had ventured upon the extravagance of having one modest dish from the restaurateur, and was rewarded by the marked satisfaction which she saw gradually diffused over his face as soon as breath came to the aid of his senses.

‘How is it with you, Louis?’ pursued Madame; ‘has Ursule brought you home all the news lately?’

‘Not much news,’ he said, smiling; ‘but I know about the sunset last evening, and the little girl, and the “Jeune Marguerite,” do I not, Ursule?’

Madame stared. ‘What foolish things, to be sure! Have you not told him all the talk about Mademoiselle de Chaulieu and her marriage with M. Valette? Nor what you heard Susanne relating to me of her master, the sous-lieutenant’s difficulties with his family? No? well, you young people are inexplicable! Have you seen our Madame to-day?’

The girl coloured crimson. ‘Do not talk of her! She expects me to endure too much; but it is at an end—I do not go to her again.’

‘Not go to her again!’

‘Not?’ grunted Monsieur, affectionately contemplating the morsel upon his fork.

‘It is true.’

‘But what! why! I do not comprehend: she cannot do without you.’

'I cannot help it,' said Ursule, pettishly; 'it is her own desire.'

'Then it must be because you refused——' and Madame, feeling herself a miracle of prudence, stopped, nodded, and then shook her head. But she had gone too far. M. Sanson, feeling in himself an utter incapability of originating an idea, was in the habit of completing sentences for other people, and perceiving an opportunity for a speech longer than usual, he took advantage of his wife's pause.

'Because you refused to go to Rouen with the old lady,' said he, triumphantly.

'Be quiet, Sanson!' interrupted his wife; but it was too late. Ursule bit her lip, Madame fidgeted, Monsieur opened his eyes; Louis alone took no apparent notice. 'He talks without knowing what he says,' continued Madame, apologetically.

'Eh?'

'There, there; that will do. Eat your dinner, like a good man.'

M. Sanson laughed good-humouredly. 'Ah, she crooked her finger when the ring was put on,' he said, indicating his wife by a sign.

'What was that for?' inquired Louis.

'What! don't you know? When a young girl gets married, if the ring slides straight down the finger, she is her husband's slave all her life, poor thing; but if it stops at the second joint, he will never be able to get the upper hand. I thought of it for a week before, and much good that did me; for, when the time came, something took off my attention, and before I knew anything about it the ring was on! Ah, if I can only get a second chance!'

There was something so ludicrous in Madame's threat, and

in the notion of her being in any sense a slave to her obedient husband, that Ursule could not help laughing merrily; and, after all, it was just possible Louis had not noticed that unlucky slip of Monsieur's—or he might forget it—or, at least, she would not think about it now. She made an efficient hostess, and the repast had evidently been brought to a successful termination, when Monsieur, with a sigh of satisfaction, washed down the whole of a Neufchâtel cheese with a tumbler of light wine; Louis, who could scarcely realize an ordinary man's appetite, looking on with wondering amusement.

'What has become of M. Pierre?' asked Madame. 'I have not seen him for an age.'

'Nor I,' said Louis, eagerly. 'What can be keeping him away?'

'Perhaps what Auguste Drouet told me has truth in it after all, though he talks so much that I do not pay attention to half; but he assured me that M. Renait desires his son to marry Mademoiselle Roget, daughter of the Maire of B——, with I do not know how many thousand francs dowry, and that the young man is averse.'

She glanced at Ursule as she spoke. Madame could not live at the bottom of the stairs, and remain ignorant of Pierre's feelings towards the girl; but her own sentiments on the subject were conflicting. She was proud of her favourite's conquest, yet appalled at the utter hopelessness of such a marriage being ever permitted, and unable to solve her doubts as to her own conduct in the matter, by carrying them to confession, because she knew that afterwards the marriage of the rich clay-moulder's son with the young heretic could not innocently be allowed even to enter into her dreams. She would not altogether give up the idea, and yet dared not harbour it. She crossed her little fat hands on her lap, and looked curiously at Ursule as

she announced his betrothal; but the girl only shrugged her shoulders and slightly lifted her eyebrows, and she could not make out whether her indifference was real or feigned. She chatted away for some time longer, until a summons came from below, and arousing Jules with difficulty from an after-dinner nap, she conveyed him safely down the stairs.

‘It has been nice; but I wish you would not look so terribly tired, Louis,’ said his sister, kneeling in her favourite attitude by his side.

‘So that was your secret?’

‘O Louis, I hoped you had not heard! That dear, stupid old Monsieur! But never mind now. After to-day, I would not go; no, not for all the holidays in the world. And what do I want of holidays? It just seemed tempting, you know, at first; but the feeling soon went away. I should be miserable without you. And with Madame! No, indeed.’

Louis sighed. ‘I suppose it cannot be now; but I should dearly have liked you to go, my Ursule.’

‘I will tell you how it shall be: by-and-by, when you have earned a fortune, and grown strong, we will go together—you and I.’

Grown strong! It seemed a mockery to talk of him and strength in one breath, and perhaps Louis felt it so, when he turned his face into the pillow and did not answer. He said nothing; nothing even when Ursule talked on, in a low, dreaming voice, of the lovely apple-orchards in their rosy blush of blossom, and the glossy chestnut trees, and the old grey chateaux by river banks, which they would see and linger by in that wonderful future time when he was strong. But his grasp tightened on the little brown Bible, and perhaps there came to him visions of a more abiding Beauty.

The day passed, and another after it; Ursule did not go near

Madame, and Pierre Renait did not come. Louis was in despair about his friend; he had scarcely known how much he counted upon his visits, and what a break they made in the day's unvaried monotony, until now that they were wanting. He worried himself into one of his worst headaches when he found that the following morning came and went without Pierre; and Ursule acted the tyrant, and summarily deprived him of his painting, when she saw his hands so weak and trembling that he could hardly hold the brush. By this time she had relented towards Madame. Her anger was never long-lived, and when she pictured to herself the desolation and dreariness down-stairs, her heart smote her.

'After all, she does not mean what she says, any more than I do,' she said to Louis. 'I will run down as usual; I heard her come in not five minutes ago.'

But her mission was unsuccessful. Madame's door was persistently locked, and though she asked for admittance more than once, not even a reply was vouchsafed. Tears gathered in her eyes as she slowly went up the stairs again. Were they losing all their friends? Had her tongue offended Pierre as surely as Madame? Never was she so gay as that afternoon in her endeavours to prevent Louis from missing his friend; she chatted, laughed, sang, and brought her pigeons in to show him. The next day, when she knew again that Madame was at home, she went down, but with the same result; the door was fastened inexorably, and half irritated, half grieved, she went to Madame Sanson to know whether she could afford her an explanation.

Her old friend listened with a perplexed face. 'She is obstinate, and she is very angry; I do not think anything will satisfy her but your going to Rouen.'

'And that I cannot do,' said Ursule sadly, 'so there must be

an end of the matter. You do not know how much Louis frets in his heart over Pierre not coming. The stupid fellow; he shall hear what I think of it when I see him.'

'Perhaps the poor lad is ill.'

And this suggestion, although it did not suffice for Ursule, who was a veritable autocrat on all points that touched Louis' comfort, served to carry up-stairs as a possible explanation of his conduct. The next day Pierre was still absent, and Ursule made no attempt at reconciliation with Madame. Perhaps she would have abstained yet longer, had not Louis looked so ill and wretched, and entreated her so earnestly once more to make the trial, that pride gave way to anxiety for him, and she knocked again at Madame's door, but only to find it as closely as ever barred against her.

'This is horrible!' she exclaimed, running down to Madame Sanson; 'how can Madame be so unforgiving? and how can she manage without me?'

'I have to do it—that is all. Well, child, never mind, there is no need for it; only one can't let her live as she would if it was left to herself. It makes my old bones ache; but what then? they are not the worse.'

'I will make her let me in,' said Ursule, stamping her foot, and much shocked at the extra labour which she knew her desertion must have entailed upon the good old woman.

'She will not, unless you are prepared with concessions. Why not go with her, child? You will be doing a kindness, as well as making the peace; and you know in your heart that Louis would like you to go, and that he shall be as well cared for as if he were my own.'

'It is not possible. Even if I had thought of it before, I could not now, when he has not even Pierre.'

'Ah, well, if that is all,' said Madame mysteriously. 'perhaps if you went Monsieur Pierre would come.'

'If I went!—what riddles do you talk?'

'It used to be all very well; but you are older now, and Pierre is a modest young man; he knows that it is not altogether *convenable* for him to make so many visits, and that the world will talk. That is not good for a girl.'

'Did Pierre himself tell you this?' asked Ursule, with curling lip.

'Something of the sort.'

'When?'

'This very morning.'

'I would not have believed—the folly, the childishness!' Her voice, angry and impetuous as it was, quivered. She began to think that all the world was against her, and she turned away from Madame and drummed with her fingers upon the window-panes.

Madame's account, though right in its conclusions, was not altogether correct as to facts. Pierre, it is true, had been there that morning, but it was in a fluster of indignation, and a professed determination to make his way up-stairs in spite of his father's injunctions. His presence on the balcony on the day of the fête had been commented upon and reported to his father, who, upon questioning his wife and daughters, learned something of the true state of the case, and determined at once to put matters upon a safe footing by giving a reality to what had long been talked of in the family, and asking the hand of rich Mademoiselle Roget for his son. Pierre had not dared so much as to expostulate when his father quietly added a desire that his visits at the Lafons' should be discontinued; but he made up for his silence by storming furiously in private, and



his conversation with Madame Sanson was enlivened by a variety of distracted ejaculations and gestures which were absolutely tragic in their vehemence. After what he confided to her, she had the good sense to refuse to allow him to go upstairs; and perhaps her decision relieved him, although he thought it necessary to press for permission, and to declare himself ready to defy all the enemies of his happiness and cling to Ursule. He really felt and looked very wretched; but, after all, he did not for a moment entertain the idea of combating his father's will, and was well aware that his fate in the shape of a contract would soon be signed.

Madame had altered this little history in her hint to Ursule, and for two reasons—first, out of delicacy to the girl, and, secondly, from doubt of what her feelings might be. If she could be induced to go away, there was no occasion, she reasoned, for her little excursion to be spoiled, as it surely would be if she had thought of young Monsieur Pierre in anything beyond the light of Louis' friend; and, on the other hand, this absence, short as it was, might be the means of distracting her thoughts, and changing their current. She dwelt upon all this with real admiration for her diplomatic powers, and was so wrapped up in it that she started and uttered a little scream, when Ursule turned suddenly round and said abruptly,

‘I have heard it said that when one has wished for something very much, it often comes with all the pleasantness taken out of it. At first I wanted to go to Rouen, and, now that I do not wish it at all, I suppose I shall go.’

‘Good, good!’ said Madame Sanson. ‘Now all will be well. Not wish to go? Bah! that is folly. It will enchant you so that you will never want to come back again.’

‘Who is to tell Madame?’ asked Ursule, still crossly.

‘I will manage all that. And see here, I will sleep in your room all the time you are away, so that Louis shall want for nothing in the night.’

The girl flung her arms round her neck.

‘You are a hundred times better to me than I deserve! Will you really do that? Then I shall go with a light heart, and I will begin to enjoy it from this moment, if it is only to please you.’

Madame had no fears of her lodger. She knew that such a concession on Ursule’s part would at once restore her to good humour; and she was right. Nothing could be more gracious, more affable, than Madame d’Aurigny that evening when Ursule went to see her. No allusion was made to past disagreements or bolted doors; she was full of talk about the charms of her relation, the avocat’s wife, and the costumes to be arranged for the visit. From every receptacle in the room she had rummaged the faded splendours of past days. Ursule—who was inwardly chafing at having been, as it were, cajoled into the expedition against her judgment, and, if the truth must be told, a little bit jealous at Louis’ expressions of delight—was seized with horror lest Madame might be going to array herself for the occasion in some of these strange relics. If Madame had not been absorbed in her own affairs, the girl’s manner could scarcely have escaped comment: she would not profess any pleasure, scarcely attempted thanks, and gave her opinion listlessly, only rousing herself to speak with energy when it was necessary to withhold Madame from some very preposterous scheme of decoration. The truth was, that her nature was altogether undisciplined, and it was the spoiled-child instinct that made her desire to punish Madame for having entrapped her into giving way to her wishes.

Yet, in spite of herself, and a determination not to be agree-

able, she could not help, little by little, feeling drawn into interest. The change, the novelty, the first journey she remembered—new people, a new place, a new life; there was too much quicksilver in her composition for her to remain really passive at the prospect. Her very ignorance saved her the shy misgivings which might be expected to trouble a girl in her position. It is true that her dress caused her some qualms, for a more slender wardrobe can scarcely be conceived; but, with her dreams of a genial and easily satisfied world, the thought did not cause her much anxiety. A bright ribbon made it pretty in Louis' eyes, and she concluded it would be the same with others. Louis, nevertheless, was not so secure, and Madame d'Aurigny herself anticipated the question before Ursule made up her mind to inquire.

‘What is to be your new robe for the occasion?’

‘Mine, Madame.’

‘But certainly! It is necessary; it will not be possible for you to enter the house of a family of distinction like my cousin's without it.’

‘Then,’ said Ursule, resolutely, ‘I had better stay away. A new dress, Madame! and where is the money to come from. Decidedly, I can only stay away.’

‘Do not be so impetuous; you take away one's breath. There can be no question now of going or staying, since the letter is despatched announcing our arrival on Saturday.’

‘Nevertheless, Madame, I need not go.’

‘Bah, bah! I only spoke in jest. The dress will do charmingly! A little re-trimming:—not even that? Well, it is simple,’ said Madame, making up her mind to the shabby attire with a sigh; ‘and on the whole it may be as well that the dress should be remarkable only on me.’

'They will not expect much when they know that I sweep your room,' said Ursule, mischievously.

'Hush, child, hush ! Are you mad ? Do you not know that you go as a demoiselle, as my friend ? You will ruin me with your imprudence ! I entreat you to be discreet, and not to proclaim everything which goes on here in private. My cousin would be shocked were she to learn to what a position my unfortunate affairs have reduced me ; it is unnecessary that she should do so. If you find yourself drawn dangerously into allusions, pass lightly on, treating it as badinage. I depend upon your discretion.'

Luckily for the lately established peace, at this moment Madame Sanson entered the room, and Ursule was enabled to escape and carry her indignation to Louis. But he would hear no complaints. So completely had he conquered the first selfish disinclination to spare her—if, indeed, it could at any time have been called by so harsh a name—that there was nothing forced in his warm delight, and never could she remember him so buoyant and well as during the day or two that elapsed before Saturday. Her dreams were nothing in comparison with his, and the minutest preparation was to him full of interest.

Throughout Friday the rain poured down pitilessly. A kind of tarpaulin covering was drawn across the opening over the stairs ; the house was darkened ; the rain went on steadily drip, drip, upon the temporary roof. Ursule and Louis sat hand in hand, talking busily. He would not allow her to be in the least sentimental about the parting, either then or when the parting really came ; and very little would have served her for an excuse, even at the last moment, to withdraw her promise.

‘St. Ouen, remember, Ursule; the transept windows and the west porches.’

‘Yes.’

‘And the organ staircase at St. Maclou, of which my father made a drawing.’

‘Honestly, my Louis, does it make you happier for me to go?’

‘Honestly, it does. Already I am feasting upon your coming back; and you know that if the blind beggar can’t see the world, it is as well for his dog to look about him! Do not put any more impossible things within my reach, but come here and tell me how soon you will be able to write.’

‘The very instant I get there. Hark! Yes, Madame, I am coming. Louis, the *facteur* has come for the luggage; I must go. Oh, this is dreadful! I will never do it again; do you hear? This is the first and last time. Coming, Madame! Good-bye, my dear one, good-bye—a hundred good-byes!’

When Louis relaxed the listening attitude which he preserved while the faintest echo of her step and voice was audible, the bright flush on his cheek had completely faded away. He leant back against the pillows, and closed his eyes, her last words in his thoughts: ‘She will never do it again. No, she is right; in our next separation it will be for me to go, for her to be left behind!’





## CHAPTER V.

### THE CLAYTONS.

Upon the glass the creeping fly  
Will shut out mightiest worlds on high,  
And care, to earthly projects given,  
Will hide from man his God and heaven.

*'The Cathedral.'*

**P**EOPLE show their characters in their rooms; therefore it may not be amiss to give a sketch of the drawing-room at No. 100, New Terrace, London, before we glance at its owners. It was a long room, plainly but prettily furnished; the fire-place, to which the fancy of the first possessor had added a high, old-fashioned, and curiously carved chimney-piece, stood half-way down the room, and was flanked on either side by low, comfortable-looking book-cases. The room ended in a large bow, curtained and fitted with a chintz-covered window-seat; opposite to the fire-place was a small sofa and a piano. The Persian carpet had evidently seen many years of service, so that the pattern required imagination to come to the aid of the eyes; but it blended admirably with the well-worn air of the greater number of articles in the room. The china that was placed about, though excellent of its kind, was solid-looking, and not such as might easily be broken;

not know that I am really much worse off than other people. Every one lives at railroad speed now-a-days: the weeks are not half long enough for the things that have to be crammed into them. And I am sure, on the whole, that it suits me; I should be perfectly miserable unless my hands were full.'

'Nevertheless, Joyce, I am not sure that it is good for you.'

'It doesn't hurt me, papa; I am quite strong.'

'Yes,' said Mr. Clayton, looking fondly on his daughter's healthy, handsome face; 'I don't think you will easily be overdone with hard work, in health; and we will put that on one side, or leave the question to your mother. But there are other ways of your life harming you.'

Joyce drew back, a little hurt.

'Papa, do you mean that I do anything of which you disapprove?'

'I mean that the choking thorns are not only the riches or the pleasures of the world.'

'But the cares also? Yes, of course; but then, what is one to do?—everything does seem to come at once. Besides, papa, the things themselves——' Joyce hesitated.

'Are useful, you mean?'

'Yes; at least, I mean they are not pleasant; it is not that I like them. Surely that must be different?'

'Self-indulgence would never be your form of self-pleasing, Joyce.'

She twisted a slip of paper she was holding into a spill.

'What is one to do?' she said, a little impatiently. 'Papa, you really don't know how the small things accumulate!'

Mr. Clayton took no notice of the tone, but he answered quietly, 'The only safeguard for any of us is to cultivate the spirit of watchfulness. We are taught to set bounds to our

pleasures ; but it is by no means impossible for so-called duties to run away with us—eh, Joyce ? My dear, I know how much you get through, and, as far as I am concerned, I only blame myself for using your help so largely as I do——’

‘Papa, don’t say that ; I like it,’ interrupted Joyce.

‘But,’ continued her father, ‘there is the universal rule, that we must take in, in order rightly to give out. Put the question honestly to yourself, does a quiet time ever come ? Is not a fresh scheme or excitement always presenting itself ?’

Joyce was silent. ‘Thank you for telling me,’ she said at length, with something of an effort. ‘I will think over it ; only really I don’t believe you know how impossible it is to keep out of a network. Now, there is this affair of Lydia Baker’s.’

‘I thought Miss Foster had undertaken Lydia Baker.’

‘So she has, but she makes such mistakes !’

‘Poor Miss Foster !’ said Mr. Clayton, resuming his usual cheery manner ; ‘one mistake is heavily visited upon her ! By the way, Joyce, I had forgotten what I came in to tell you. Clement will be here to-night.’

‘To-night ! Why he is a perfect Will-o’-the-Wisp ! And really, he might give us a little longer notice. I will go and see about his room at once. Does mamma know ?’

‘Your mother has a headache, and is lying down : don’t let her be disturbed. If Maynard comes about the harmonium, you must speak to him, and tell him that his first experiments upon the musical future of the district had better for the present be confined to the Gilpins and Walter Brett. I suppose that the steps may as well depart with me ?’

He shouldered them as he spoke, and went out of the room, Joyce following him into the landing, and then going thoughtfully up-stairs.



‘Visitors by the dozen on such a day as this, and then Mr. Maynard to expatiate for an hour upon those wearisome harmonium stops. If papa is right, what is to become of one ! I know that I have been obliged to take bits out of my reading-time ; but still they are all necessary things that I do, and it is very, very hard to avoid them. People are for ever letting their stitches drop, and expecting others to pick them up again, like old Granny Wilcox and her grandchild. Half the things come because I am a clergyman’s daughter, and really it is impossible for papa to understand. I am sure I should be thankful to have more leisure.’

Which, as far as it went, was quite true, to do Joyce Clayton justice. Activity and energy were at once thrown into anything which came before her in the light of a duty, but none the less would she often gladly have launched them into pleasanter paths.

Mr. Clayton was perpetual curate of a district church in a London suburb, and Joyce was an only child. Ever since the time when she was a little toddling baby, just able to stand by his chair and hold up a rosy mouth for kissing, she had been her father’s pet and constant companion ; so that, from her alphabet onwards, he had taught her all she knew, except the music which was her mother’s special branch. Consequently, the love which existed between them was as deep and full as such a love could be. Joyce inherited her father’s talent, as well as a certain capability which accompanied it, and added tenfold to its usefulness ; but the peculiar sunny brightness of his disposition was not so entirely shared by her. It was a rare charming quality. Clouds might threaten, annoyances gather, a hundred parochial worries surround him, and still his buoyant spirit and a never-failing spring of fun seemed to

shake them off without an effort. There was something so genial, so generous, so young, in his nature, that it attracted people, whether they would or not ; and to have Mr. Clayton at a vestry meeting was certain victory over the most pig-headed of churchwardens.

As Joyce reached the head of the stairs, her mother called her into her bed-room. She sat in a low chair by the window, working—a fair, pretty, placid woman, altogether unlike her dark winsome-looking little daughter.

‘Where is your father, Joyce?’

‘He has just this moment gone out, mamma.’

‘How tiresome! I quite forgot to tell him that the glass must be taken out of the store-room.’

‘He thought you were resting; so that he would not disturb you.’

‘Dear me, it is very vexing, with Clement coming this evening.’

‘What brings up Clement at this time of the year, when he never can be induced to recognise London at all?’

‘There is his letter—you can read it; I am sure I hardly understand it myself, Clement’s handwriting is so puzzling; but there is something about his going to France.’

‘To see his aunt!’ Joyce exclaimed, reading in astonishment. ‘I hope she won’t turn out such another woman as Mrs. Blunt herself.’

‘It will not matter to you, Joyce.’

‘Not at all. It is only for Clement’s sake.’

‘Clement should be more considerate, and not come at such unexpected times. I thought his carpet was to be turned, or something?’

‘Papa gave orders about it last week, luckily. I dare say

this is some sudden freak of Mrs. Blunt's, and that he is obliged to set off at once; otherwise he might certainly have bestowed a longer warning upon us. Never mind, it is not really of any consequence.'

'That is all very well, my dear, but you are no judge; you have not to look after the cook, and she quite alarms me by her manner: I wish your father would speak to her.'

'Stupid thing!' said Joyce, indignantly, 'you are a great deal too good-natured to her, mamma. Why don't you give her a good set down, and make her understand?'

'Your father must do it; I cannot undertake it. How dreadfully hot it is! What are you going to do this afternoon? I wish you would come with me to the nursery-gardens.'

'I can't possibly, mamma. Mr. Maynard is coming about the harmonium, and the Tinlings about those church markers, and the Hewitts about Lydia Baker.'

'Well,' said Mrs. Clayton, submissively, for she never interfered with her daughter's plans, 'then, I suppose I must go by myself.'

'The flowers in the drawing-room are still quite fresh, you know, mamma.'

'Quite faded, you mean, Joyce. I was absolutely ashamed of them yesterday when the Mileses were here. No; flowers are the one luxury I cannot do without—my one indulgence.'

Joyce sighed, and said no more. It might be but one luxury, but it was a very expensive one, and a burdensome addition to the weekly bills. When she was able to go with her mother, she contrived to check the expenditure, but it was very seldom that she had the time. She went to the window, and looked idly out in a manner unlike herself. It was, as Mrs. Clayton had said, unusually hot. The window was wide open, and full

of mignonette plants—an outer sun-blind let down. The opposite houses were in grey shadow, but nothing could soften their inflexible lines, or make them look otherwise than hard and oppressive. In not a few the shutters were closed, and the occupants had escaped from dusty London to the sweet country life of green lanes, and dewy gardens, and delicious hay-fields. One poor little hopeful bird, down in an area, sang with all its might a song of rejoicing over the square bit of blue sky above its cage. The district was not as yet so densely crowded but that glimpses of trees might be caught in and out between the houses, but the roads were new and stony; giant notices of building leases reared themselves up here and there, wherever a little uneven patch of green met the eye; great rubbish deposits marked the places where other rows were soon about to spring; boys hung about the wooden fences surrounding them; a woman with a glaring white cap rattled her milk-cans noisily down the street; in the distance, a hurdy-gurdy feebly droned over and over again the last new popular air. Joyce turned away from the window, thinking that, over and over again, was the daily burden of life.

‘Please, Miss Clayton, some gentleman wants to see master or you.’

‘Show him into the study, and I will come. It is Mr. Maynard, mamma.’

Joyce ran down the stairs. Hitherto the new church had gone on—very indifferently, to be sure—without instrumental aid; now, however, the harmonium was to represent an organ, and Mr. Maynard the organist. She was not detained quite the length of time she anticipated; but the hurdy-gurdy had ground three times through its tunes before Mr. Maynard finished all he had to say, discussed the place where it could most advan-

tageously stand, the merits of certain stops, and the formation of practising classes. It was very wearisome to Joyce, who did not love music sufficiently well to feel enthusiasm for it upon its own account, and only looked upon it in the light of something which ought to be done; but, in spite of her feeling, she contrived, as usual, to throw herself heartily into the cause, and to sympathise so brightly with poor Mr. Maynard's difficulties that he never so much as suspected the penance he was inflicting upon her.

'Twice a week at present, at seven o'clock, in the boys' school-room, on Wednesdays and Saturdays. You may depend upon my being regular, and I dare say my mother will spare our housemaid, who has fortunately been taught class-singing at school. Good afternoon, Mr. Maynard. There go two evenings,' groaned poor Joyce disconsolately, as the door closed. 'It will be a dreadful tie to one, especially now in these delicious long summer days, when I do sometimes get a walk with papa; however, the harmonium is a special hobby of his, so that he cannot complain; and if I do not go, those horrid Allens will have it all their own way. Modern Painters! Where did it come from, I wonder? and this is the volume with that grand description of cumuli, and cirrhi, and all the clouds.'

Joyce pounced with delight upon the book, but a voice in the hall, very audible through the thin walls, made her utter an exclamation of annoyance, and jump up to look for the silks required for her lesson in church work. The Miss Tinlings were impressive ordinary young ladies, full of admiration for Miss Clayton's superior talents, and giving vent to their astonishment in certain stereotyped ejaculations. Joyce laboured through instructions which seemed to her childishly minute as to ribbon and silk and gold braid, and got nothing more satis-

factory than, 'Oh, fancy!' from the eldest Miss Tinling, and 'Exactly,' from the younger, at the conclusion; and even the latter word was deprived of the hope it at first conveyed that she was understood, when, in a hesitating voice, she was told that really they felt so afraid that they were quite certain to fail, that they should be most grateful if she would kindly trace the patterns for them upon the ribbon. It was just the difficult part of the whole concern, and Joyce felt infinitely provoked.

'If you really want to learn, you had better do it all yourselves,' said she severely.

'Oh, Miss Clayton, I am sure I never could. What, trace all these fine lines? Oh, fancy!'

'But, indeed, if you would not mind just setting it going so far, and then would kindly give us one more lesson, I really think we might accomplish something. Not like your beautiful work, of course—that we could not expect; but ours, if it is not looked at too closely, might do.'

'Then, you must wait,' Joyce said despairingly; 'I have really very little time to spare.'

'Exactly. I am sure we often say, Arabella and I, that we wonder how you can possibly get through half what you do. You must be always at work.'

'Just fancy!' ejaculated Arabella.

'And I am sure if there is anything we could do at any time to help you, if you would show us exactly how you like it done, we would do our very best.'

'Thank you,' said Joyce, touched by the real good nature which underlay all these unpromising offers of help, and making up her mind to get up an hour earlier and set the markers in train.

The sisters were so charmed with the pleasantness of her

manner, that they lingered some time longer, finally taking leave with many more suggestions of assistance, and assurances of a speedy second visit. Joyce had but time to scribble a hasty note, asking the character of a servant, when Mrs. and Miss Hewitt were announced. Mother and daughter came stiffly into the room, wanting to be set at ease, and evidently disappointed at not finding Mr. Clayton there to befriend them with his genial courtesy. They had come to speak on the subject of Lydia Baker; but it was so apparent that they could not comfortably enter upon it or any other conversation until the weather, past, present, and future, had been disposed of, that quite five minutes was given up unreservedly to a discussion of its merits, and the heat had been satisfactorily resolved into an imaginary thunder-storm before Joyce ventured to inquire.

‘Have you made up your mind about Lydia Baker?’

‘We could not do so altogether without coming to consult—Mr. Clayton,’ Mrs. Hewitt was going to say, but stopped, thinking it not quite polite.

‘Miss Foster recommended us to come,’ put in her daughter.

‘I suppose, after Lydia’s behaviour, Miss Foster is averse to her being tried?’

‘No, indeed, Miss Clayton. She considers the girl to be weak and easily led; but, in the sort of situation for which my sister requires her, she would be altogether under the eye of a very steady, respectable person, and Miss Foster believes might do well. Still it is a matter of real consequence, and my husband is very anxious to know Mr. Clayton’s opinion.’

‘Lydia was in my class, and we were greatly interested in her; but her conduct has been exceedingly bad.’

‘She is very young,’ pleaded Mrs. Hewitt, and then stopped confused. It seemed almost a charge against Joyce herself.

'She has chosen bad companions; and then came all this Dissenting business, and her impertinence to Miss Foster.'

'Miss Foster thinks she may not have been altogether judicious in her treatment of the girl. She does not wish Lydia's behaviour to herself to be considered.'

'But, Mrs. Hewitt, just consider. She has had more advantages than one girl out of twenty, and now she makes this return. It is gross ingratitude.'

'Of course,' said Mrs. Hewitt, hesitating, 'if Mr. Clayton thinks——'

Joyce was honest itself. 'Papa does not think so badly of her as I do,' she said; 'but I am convinced Miss Foster is wrong in still believing in her.'

'Thank you. I will tell my husband. I hope your mamma is well?'

'Pretty well, thank you; she has just gone out.'

'Ah! I am afraid she will find it very oppressive.'

The weather returned again, and terminated the conversation. As the mother and daughter walked away from the door, Jane Hewitt said,

'As Miss Clayton speaks so decidedly, you won't think any more of Lydia Baker, I suppose?'

'My dear,' said her mother, quietly, 'Miss Clayton is very sensible and clever; but she is very young, and, in my experience of life, I have found no judges so unmercifully severe as young girls. Miss Foster is a goose; but she has lived longer in the world, knows its trials and temptations, and, if the matter rested with myself, I should abide by her opinion. But your father has only seen her weak side, and I cannot tell how he will wish me to act. Only pray, Jane, don't condemn everybody whom Miss Clayton dislikes.'



If Joyce could only have heard her !

She had hurried up-stairs, feeling as if at last escape to her own room was possible, but caught even on the road by the little housemaid with inquiries as to the arrangement of certain chairs in Mr. Blunt's room. Mr. Blunt's room it remained always, kept for the favourite cousin since the time when he spent his holidays with them, during two years that his father and mother were travelling abroad, and still scarcely less home to him than the Devonshire cottage where he lived with his mother. She was Félicité, Madame d'Aurigny's sister. Long ago, when she was very young, Mr. Blunt fell in love with her in Paris, and brought her back to England as his wife. So many years had passed since then, that she had almost ceased to be French in more than birth ; for some time she paid periodical visits to her father and mother, and after their death to her sister ; but she and her husband both grew older, travelling became wearisome, money more valuable, the visits were discontinued. His death finally threw her into a state of health in which a morbid dread of change became a predominant fancy, and for years nothing had passed between her and Madame d'Aurigny except an occasional correspondence, constrained on both sides. Clement was too good a son ever to discuss his mother's peculiarities ; but Joyce was shrewd enough to put together little trifles, and to make a tolerably correct guess at her character. The relationship to the Claytons was on Mr. Blunt's side : he and Mrs. Clayton were first cousins, and, as not unfrequently happens, the intimacy was closer in the second generation than the first.

When Joyce reached her room, she glanced round her with a sigh of satisfaction. It looked particularly cool and pleasant. Here, as elsewhere in the house, the furniture was as pretty as

it was simple : a curtainless bed, stained deal chairs and table, a few good illuminations, some admirable photographs in Oxford frames, and a tempting but not particularly tidy book-stand. Joyce had intended, as she told her father, to occupy the short time she knew would be disengaged in thinking over his words, and in trying to find out how much of truth their warning contained, but she could not concentrate her thoughts. Even with the first attempt there arose a vision of the markers, the shape of the emblems, the colour of the ribbon ; then Clement floated into her head, accompanied by a throb of warm pleasure at the prospect of soon seeing him ; and he was in turn driven out by a recollection of Lydia Baker's misdeeds, and an uneasy conviction that Mrs. Hewitt was not so deeply impressed by them as she ought to have been.

Is it the especial snare of those who enter keenly into whatever occupies them, that the interest clings too closely ? Some such misgiving passed through Joyce Clayton's mind ; then her eye sought the illuminated text which hung above her dressing-table, and she felt satisfied : 'Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with all thy might.' It had been her motto from a child—thoroughness in the smallest matter, were it but the making a pincushion.

On her table lay a small photograph ready for tinting, and by its side an open paint-box. Joyce knew she had just time to do what was required before three little school-girls came for a lesson in knitting. Thinking could be put off till the day was over, and meanwhile she would take advantage of the last rays of the sun and work. It was rest as well to sit where something that deserved to be called fresh air came in at the open window, and where it was not impossible to get a really broad field of sky, without intervening chimneys or the neces-

sity of making the best of smoke by imagining it to be cloud.

Joyce's own face was quite without cloud. Unconsciously, as often happens, her countenance assumed the expression of that she was copying, and looked more subdued and tender than usual. Her eyes were brown, bright, and quick in movement; her hair and eyelashes several shades darker than her eyes; her complexion clear; all her actions prompt and alert. She made good progress in her work, and nothing could have been neater or more to the purpose than the few well-chosen touches which her hand bestowed. When the church clock struck seven, and the band which came to the terrace twice a week struck up its first tune from the 'Barbiere,' Joyce jumped up, looked at her photograph with satisfaction, and hastily put aside her paints.

'Now for the stockings,' said she; 'and then either Clement will have arrived, or I shall get a talk with papa.'

She peeped into the study on her way down to what she called the parish-room.

'I heard you come in, papa.'

'Does that mean that you are come to take possession?'

'Not yet. It is stocking-night,' said Joyce, holding up her knitting-needles, and making a face.

'Ah! I thought I saw Hannah admit the three Fates. Which represents Atropos?'

'Why?'

'Because I shall know to whom I am indebted for dropped stitches. Is your mother's headache better?'

'Yes—or, at least, I think so,' said Joyce, correcting herself. 'She has gone to the nursery gardens this evening, and I dare say has been kept in Malvern Square.'

‘Alone?’

‘Yes; I could not go. Papa, Miss Foster is so weak as to wish the Hewitts to try Lydia Baker at the Children’s Convalescent Home.’

‘She is a capital woman, upon my word,’ said Mr. Clayton, with energy. ‘Half the district visitors in the world would be affronted at that girl’s conduct.’

‘And don’t you think they would be right?’

‘Don’t you see, Joyce, what I admire in her is the way she puts aside personal feelings. She thinks of the people, not of herself.’

‘But then she encourages ingratitude! Papa, I see in your eyes that you will think I was wrong, for I tried to persuade Mrs. Hewitt not to take Lydia. And you know Miss Foster was altogether mistaken about her, last month.’

‘Hum! The Fates must be growing impatient by this time.’

‘Yes, I know. You are not going out again?’

‘I shall go and meet your mother. And I think it not impossible that I may walk round by the Hewitts. There, be off!’

Joyce went down to her three little expectant maidens, not altogether satisfied. She was ready to submit to her father, with a warm proud delight in his superiority; but to have Miss Foster’s judgment preferred before her own was no slight trial—Miss Foster, the little, shrinking, undecided woman, who had been as slow to accept the responsibility of district-visiting as she was ready tearfully to acknowledge her mistakes and to accept advice. Advice had always been promptly administered by Joyce, and if she had looked more closely into her heart at this moment she would have found there a wrathful feeling against Miss Foster for what might be considered a rebellion.

But, although the question actually crossed her mind, whether she was not indeed unreasonable, she put it aside. At all events, there was no time to think about it now. A busy click of needles went on in the little room. 'Knit two, purl two,' repeated Joyce. 'Bessie, your heel will never be done, unless you are more careful.' 'Please, 'm, mother wishes for a rib.' Little balls of yarn grew smaller and smaller, the light faded away, the children stood up to go, and a voice was heard in the passage, 'Mr. and Mrs. Clayton both out, are they? Then where is Miss Clayton?'





## CHAPTER VI.

### EVERY-DAY DUST.

Full oft in dull unbroken flow  
The river of our life steals on ;  
And thoughts that once could make it glow  
Are all too willingly foregone.

Some light it takes from heaven—and yet  
The round of small prosaic cares  
Wins, day by day, more power to set  
A gulf between us and our prayers.

W. BRIGHT.

**T**HERE was a warm greeting between the cousins, who had been brought up together like brother and sister, when Joyce ran up into the hall. The cabman had just carried in a portmanteau, and was being paid by a young man of six or seven and twenty, with a pleasant face, grey eyes, and light curly hair. He despatched the driver, and caught Joyce by both hands.

‘So you are the only one at home? I began to think the family had decamped.’

‘You left trains such an open question, that there was no use in making guesses as to which you would patronize.’

'Well, let me look at you,' he said, as they reached the drawing-room. 'Joyce, I declare you are grown!'

'How brown you are!' said she, taking no notice of this insult. 'We so rarely see you in summer that I don't know you with this sort of complexion.'

'Then, according to my old nurse's theories, you don't know me at all.'

'Why not?'

'Have you never heard of her prudence in declining to give an opinion upon people until she has "summered and wintered" them?'

'Never: it is delightful.'

'It would not suit you at all, Joyce. No power would prevent you from delivering your views after the first week.'

'I wonder what power would prevent you from teasing?'

'The mildest of influences—common charity, if it bestowed upon me something to eat. I am famished, after a journey from Devonshire.'

His cousin laughed, and ran off to give the necessary orders. She encountered her father and mother in the hall, and the greetings were gone through again as warmly as before, Clement evidently looking upon them as something infinitely nearer and dearer than ordinary cousins.

'There is a hamper down-stairs,' he said, 'which Sarah packed for you. I don't know exactly what it contains, but I fancy, flowers and greens, and those sort of things, which she believes to be unheard-of luxuries to you town-bound people. But it seems to me that you grow more flowers than we do.'

'You have known mamma long enough to have learnt that,' said Joyce, rejoining them.

'Thank you, Clement. I dare say there are some of the cottage roses.'

'Some of the cottage strawberries would be still more to the purpose—eh, Joyce?'

'Oh, papa, I have thought of nothing else ever since I saw Clement!'

'Mr. Clayton, what has happened to Joyce? Has there been a revolt among the old women; or a successfully aggravating system pursued by the little boys of the parish?'

'Never mind us for the present. Such contingencies don't occur in our well-regulated domain. There is a great deal to hear about your own home news. How is your mother? and what is this expedition across the Channel about?'

Clement became grave at once. 'I am afraid my mother is not at all well,' he said; 'she is sadly weak, and she becomes distressingly low about herself at times. You know the length of the garden-walk? Well, it is very rarely that I can get her so far.'

'That is a change indeed!'

'My being away from her so much is a great trial. I don't know how it can be avoided,' said the young man, sighing; 'but it is quite true, as she says, that the days are long and lonely for her. She sits and broods over all the past time.'

'Ah, Clement, depend upon it that "recollectedness" of old age is an untold blessing,' said Mr. Clayton, gently; and Joyce thought, though she said nothing, of the waters growing still and noiseless just before the last plunge of the cataract.

'The girls at the Rectory go to see her pretty often, I suppose?' asked Mrs. Clayton.

'Yes; only,' said Clement, brightening into a smile, 'I can never persuade her to consider them as any-bodies. She per-



sists in treating them as children, and naturally they don't like it. But, really, they try to be attentive.'

'How can she spare you now?'

'Oh, I forgot; that has still to be explained. Well, you know my mother has one relation, and but one, left in France—her sister. It is years since they have met; for my poor father gave up his custom of going abroad some time before his death, and Madame d'Aurigny could never be persuaded to come to England. Letters still come and go periodically. I don't think my mother has suffered from the separation as much as might have been expected until lately: perhaps she always felt it in her power to see my aunt, if it was necessary, and now, for the first time, begins to dread the possibility of their never meeting again. At all events, she has been quite miserable about it lately, distressed at my not having seen her since I was a small boy, and so anxious to have a really correct account from an eye-witness of her state of health and condition, that there was nothing for it but for me to give clients the slip, pack my portmanteau, and here I am on my way to Dieppe.'

'But you must have been thinking about it for some time past?'

'Thinking about it—yes. But it was only yesterday morning that I found her heart was set upon my starting without delay.'

'So you are really going to see an unknown aunt!' said Joyce, much interested. 'Do you know anything about her? What is she like?'

'I don't imagine she is like my mother's only portrait, taken when they were Félicité and Hortense Devaux together. There she has bright eyes, short curls clustering round her head, a thing at the back of it like a tower, and a waist under her arms.'

‘She lives at Dieppe, you say ; yes, I remember—and alone ?’

‘Quite alone. Poor thing, she must have a solitary time of it.’

‘Older than your mother ?’ asked Mr. Clayton.

‘No ; a few years younger. My mother was the eldest, and the beauty. Don’t you recollect her being with her poor grandfather and grandmother at Nantes, as a little child of two or three years old, and being taken out with the other poor children to be shot down by hundreds in the Plaine de Saint Mauve, and one of the butchers being so touched by the loveliness and innocent unconsciousness of the little thing, that he managed to save her, and brought her back to his wife with the words, “If there is a Judgment after all, here is one of Carrier’s accusers. There will be enough without her.”’

They had heard the story before, but it could never lose its force.

‘The wife behaved nobly, did she not ?’ said Joyce.

‘Like a true-hearted woman. She risked her own life to save her. What a time it was ! There were the poor father and mother at Bordeaux in peril themselves, and unable to hear any definite tidings ; only the most horrible rumours of their parents being drowned in the *noyades*, and the child fusiladed. And the first part was true.’

‘It is very strange to look at you, and believe that you have all that French blood in your veins.’

‘He is the image of his father,’ said Mrs. Clayton.

‘My name seems the only relic that clings to me. My poor great grandfather was Clément.’

‘Have you kept up any connection between your family and the people who saved your mother’s life ?’ said Joyce, who had been listening with eyes full of interest.

‘What would I not give if we had done so!’ said Mr. Blunt, eagerly. ‘It has not been our fault. For a long time my mother wrote regularly, and went to see them whenever she and my father were in France; but, first of all, Madame Laget died, and then her husband wrote but seldom. They had but one child—Marie, and she married, whom we have never been able to find out; and at last, when old Laget died himself, all the links seemed broken.’

‘There is a romance lying in wait for you somewhere, Clement,’ Mr. Clayton said. ‘But, to return to your aunt, do you imagine her circumstances to be good?’

‘Indifferently so, I dare say. She never alludes in her letters to anything which should make us think the contrary. She speaks of her *salon* and her pleasant view, and dwells a good deal upon living *au premier*; so I suppose she is sufficiently comfortable.’

‘Well, I think your mother is right, and that it is high time you should go and look after your relations. Blood is thicker than water. And I tell you what you may do. You young men of the present day are so abominably narrow-minded about your Gothic vagaries, you will look at nothing else. When you are at Dieppe, just take a walk to Varengeville, and bring back word whether you don’t acknowledge that poor despised Renaissance has something to say for itself after all. Such medallions as those to be called worthless, indeed!’

Clement made a face, which argued ill for an unprejudiced opinion.

‘Do you cross to-morrow?’ inquired Mrs. Clayton.

‘No. Business keeps me in town all day, so I shall take the early boat the following morning.’

‘Then you shall come to-morrow evening to the school, and

hear our first attempt to soar into the realms of harmony,' announced Joyce.

'With an accompaniment, that is,' put in Mr. Clayton, *sotto voce*.

'With many accompaniments,' corrected Joyce: 'papa's sense and Mr. Maynard's science; Miss Allen's sensibility and Miss Clayton's smattering; two little boys, who have actually been proved to have once sung the first line of a hymn rightly; and, finally, our great backbone, a harmonium.'

'Very nice,' said Mr. Blunt, absently. Everybody laughed.

'Come and have some dinner: I hear Hannah taking it into the dining-room,' said Mr. Clayton, compassionately.

Clement's privileges in the house were those of a son and brother. He had won Mr. Clayton's heart when he first came to them as a little holiday school-boy, by some resemblance, real or fancied, to a boy—older than Joyce—whom they had lost at about the same age. Mrs. Clayton was very well disposed to like any one who fell in her way, and whom she was expected to like; Joyce was delighted to have a fresh person to pet her, and, perhaps still more, to find some one with whom she could occasionally quarrel; and Clement, since the first month, had always been at home with his cousins, although, during the last year or two, they had seen little of him, especially since he had set up at Defforton as a lawyer. His mother kept him very closely with her, and Devonshire was too far from London to be convenient for Mr. Clayton's annual holiday.

No one could have been a better son than Clement, and that under trying circumstances. The same weight of selfishness seemed to have rested on the French sisters; but if it preponderated in either, it was in Mrs. Blunt, owing, probably,

to the easier life she had led. She was capricious and self-pleasing to a degree, violent when thwarted, and expecting immediate obedience to her most unreasonable demands. Clement deserved great credit for yielding readily, when he felt that non-compliance did not rest upon a question of right or wrong, and for, on more than one occasion, displaying a firmness which was as little irritating to his mother as he could make it. It was not his fault if his course of life was not, perhaps, the most advantageous for the formation of his character—rather, I should say, if it did not appear so to human eyes; for our own judgments on such matters are too one-sided to be trust-worthy, and well it is for us that the Hand which guides our path leads onwards in unerring love, in spite of our weak, resisting murmurs.

Joyce indulged, that evening, in her nearest approach to idleness—knitting; as they all sat, in the cool twilight, round the open window, and the scent of the freshly watered mignonette stole into the room. She underwent a good deal of bantering from Clement on the subject of her many avocations, but she took it all with good-humoured equanimity that evidently delighted him; and, indeed, the kindly, pleasant atmosphere was infinitely refreshing to him after the perpetual fret of his own home.

‘I declare,’ he said, ‘in spite of trees, birds, and country skies, this is a great improvement upon the Rectory, where last evening we all sat out in the garden until ten o’clock.’

‘You have told us nothing about the girls,’ Mrs. Clayton said, reproachfully.

‘Dear Mrs. Clayton, it is a subject I venture upon with awe, especially if I am to deliver all the cousinly messages with which I am charged.’

‘To be sure! I have been wondering at not hearing. What are the children growing up like?’ said Mrs. Clayton, laying down her worsted work, and looking greatly interested.

‘What is Elsie like?’ interrupted Joyce.

‘You have asked me *the* question of the village, to which no one has ever yet been found able to give a satisfactory answer. I have heard people severally express their firm convictions that they are growing up into bears, boys, and blues. Mind you, I say nothing of the sort myself.’

‘Poor children! a good deal may be forgiven them,’ said Mr. Clayton. ‘How old is Anne?’

‘Eighteen, as I know by reason of her birthday being yesterday, and my having to eat a lump of heavy, indigestible cake, which she had manufactured herself according to the family fashion.’

‘Then she is out?’

‘Out! I don’t know what she is out of—not ungainliness, I assure you. I believe poor Anne would thankfully return to short frocks, and leave the world and its troubles to Elsie.’

‘And Elsie?’

‘Wonderfully pretty; growing more so every day; but as shy as a hawk. Bella, though she is but fourteen, is the most popular of the party; and very bad it is for her. I am convinced there is twice the good in Anne and Elsie that there is in Bella. There is always something about her that is not above-board. She sent her love to dear Aunt Emily and Cousin Joyce, and longs so much to see them again. That meant, she would much like an invitation to London. Elsie was in the room, and I saw her give Miss Bella a look. I am sure that was the reason she sent no message herself: she said she could not see the use of people sending love over and over

again : if your friends knew that they had it, they could not want to be so often reminded.'

'She never will do it in a letter,' put in Joyce.

'Go on, Clement,' said Mrs. Clayton.

'Walter is still at Marlborough, and Rose is a strange, independent little monkey. There ! I think I have finished the junior branches. As to Mr. Follaton, you know, Mrs. Clayton, that he never changes ; and Miss Villars is as good, as self-sacrificing, and as undecided as ever.'

'Which tyrannises over her the most now ?' asked Joyce.

'Bella.'

'From what you say of that young lady,' said Mr. Clayton, making up his mind with a sigh, 'it seems to me it might be as well for us to take her hint, and have her here for a time. What do you say, Emily ?'

Joyce looked up in dismay, caught her father's expression, and checked the words of remonstrance which were on her tongue.

'Certainly, my dear,' Mrs. Clayton answered placidly.

'Would your brother consent ?'

I don't know, I am sure. I suppose not.'

'Mr. Follaton is difficult to move when once he has made up his mind,' said Clement, glancing at Mrs. Clayton, and thinking how unlike was her mild, easy-going character to the shy, studious brother. 'But if you do carry out these benevolent intentions, I can assure you that your charity will be put to the proof. By the way, I had forgotten what might answer the same purpose in another manner—one of the special messages with which I am charged, and this from Miss Villars, is the hope that Joyce will pay them a long visit as soon as she feels inclined.'

A long 'oh!' in the form of a groan, broke from Joyce.

‘That would be very nice for you, my dear,’ said Mrs. Clayton. ‘Why do you say, “oh”?’

‘I beg your pardon, Clement. I believe I was only thinking of your description of that horrid child. I should not really mind it: the Rectory is very pretty, and I used to like Elsie.’

‘I see Joyce valiantly aflame as defender of Miss Villars, and general opposer of tyranny,’ said her cousin, laughing.

‘Thank you; but you will not have that gratification. I could not possibly go.’

‘Why not, Joyce?’

‘Papa! why, only think of the hundred and fifty irons there are in the fire just now.’

‘My dear, you alarm me! A tenth of the number would be sufficient to burn our fingers. Clement,’ said Mr. Clayton, rubbing his cheek ruefully, ‘can you form any conception of the misery of our condition?—July in London, and Joyce engaged in the multiplication of irons.’

A little out of countenance, she said, ‘You know, papa, there is always a great deal to be done; my going away just now is simply impracticable.’ Then, as he only answered ‘Hum!’ she continued, ‘The harmonium, to begin with.’

‘I never knew you cared about music,’ said her cousin.

‘Nor do I; but somebody must attend to it, and mamma declares the buzz of a harmonium makes her quite ill. So what is to be done?’

‘The Allens.’

‘If the Allens get the arrangement of things into their hands, papa, all will start wrong. Mr. Maynard is very doubtful of himself, so much so that if he is not backed up we shall be having double chants and all sorts of atrocities.’

‘Joyce has set her heart upon Gregorians, Clement. Ah, I



don't wonder at your making a face; we shall be a very depressed congregation under their influence.'

'I range myself among the Allen faction from this moment.'

'Oh, there is no faction. You know papa better than to expect to find such a thing in his parish. If he would only honestly like them himself, no one would think of opposing him.'

'I should like to see Mr. Clayton brought into contact with our stiff-backed old Elmwood farmers. I wonder whether they would be as amenable.'

'They can't be worse than Parker, the greengrocer,' Joyce said triumphantly, 'and papa has quite brought him round. Clement, I won't have you disliking Gregorians; you shall come to the practice to-morrow.'

'My teeth will be set on edge for a week!' However, he made no further objection.

That night Joyce went up to her room feeling the fatigue of a busy day, and not a little of its excitement. In the afternoon, she had put off graver thoughts until she could have the undisturbed quiet of night to assist her in dwelling upon them; now that time had come, they seemed as far out of reach as ever. A hundred distracting fancies flitted through her brain, whenever she tried to turn her thoughts inward—dreams of usefulness, it is true, plans of charity, active work, but none the less absorbing and exciting, and opposed to self-examination. As she prayed, her mind wandered away, and several times she recalled it with a start. As she read, she thought of what she would do and say the next day. Joyce was too sincere and honest-hearted not to feel a pang of self-reproach as she collected her attention; but she contented herself with the feeling, and did not pursue it deeper. It was very true that her plans

were useful, her wishes good; none the less did she need to watch and pray, lest 'cumbered with much serving,' Mary's better part might not be hers.

The weather on the next day was as hot, though less sunny, and Mrs. Hewitt's predicted thunder-storm showed signs of approach. Joyce would very much have liked to have spent the early part of the morning, before her cousin went off to the city, at home with him; but having promised to see some sick people at that time, she gave up her own wishes without a murmur. Coming out of one of the houses, she met Miss Foster.

'Oh, Miss Clayton,' began the little woman hurriedly, 'I wanted so much to see you. I am so afraid you may be annoyed about that poor Lydia Baker.'

Poor Miss Foster's 'sos' were a continual irritation to Joyce.

'I am not in the least annoyed,' she said; 'but I think you are all treating that girl a great deal better than she deserves.'

'I do really think—I can't be sure, of course—I dare say you know best—only I can't help thinking there is some good in her,' said Miss Foster, hesitating painfully between her desire to mediate for Lydia Baker and her fear of seeming to oppose her clergyman's daughter.

'She has not shown much of it,' said Joyce, sturdily.

'No? don't you think so? She has always seemed to me to be so good to that old aunt of hers. And don't you think she is truthful?'

'Papa says you have been very good to her, at all events.'

Miss Foster's face beamed all over with pleasure.

'Oh, thank you,' she said; 'I am so relieved to know he does not disapprove.'

‘Is she going to Mrs. Hewitt’s sister, then?’

‘No; Mr. Hewitt says he will not risk it. I believe Mr. Clayton was good enough to see him last night on the subject; but Mr. Hewitt had made up his mind, and he is very determined.’

I cannot but say that Mr. Hewitt went up several steps in Joyce’s opinion by this deference to her judgment; she said, a little triumphantly,

‘I was sure it would not be safe. Then, what is to be done?’

‘I have not decided. I wanted to consult you first of all; but I have some idea of taking her myself. You know, my little maid has to leave me. It is not settled,’ said poor Miss Foster, trying to find some shield for her own imprudence.

‘Oh, Miss Foster!’

‘Do you really think I am wrong?’

‘It is offering a premium for ingratitude to all the school-girls.’

The little woman sighed. She did not think her own single-handed place quite formed a premium. She was grieved beyond measure to oppose Miss Clayton; but her heart yearned over the poor, ignorant, headstrong orphan, and she would not desert her.

‘I hope you will not mind?’

‘Of course, I don’t mind,’ Joyce answered magnanimously; ‘I am only sorry for you.’

‘Oh, that is nothing,’ Miss Foster said, her little faded face lighting up with eagerness. ‘I can do so little.’

Joyce thought, on her way home, that she was the best of little women, and only wanted common sense, by which, it is possible, she meant a reliance upon her—Joyce Clayton’s—

judgment. But without this common sense she felt sure she would do great mischief in the district.

‘Papa, all the world would be spoiled with sugar-plums if Miss Foster had things her own way!’ she exclaimed that afternoon, looking up from letter-writing.

Mr. Clayton did not answer; he was thinking of Joyce, and not of Miss Foster. He could not help fearing that her character was losing, instead of gaining, the self-control and resting power which he believed it specially needed. Action, energy, the work of the outer life, had for her so great a charm, it seemed to leave no space for the inner. Her father hesitated as to his own conduct. He might by a word have forbidden her to take part in many things that now absorbed her; but he was unwilling harshly to check the spring of bright usefulness which carried in it so much that was good; besides, hers was a nature which could scarcely be restrained from continual activity by any external trammels: she could and would obediently refrain from doing anything to which her father objected, but a hundred other things would instantly fill up the void. No; Mr. Clayton made up his mind, with a sigh, that Joyce had arrived at an age when, in such a conscience-matter as this, the control must come from herself, and that he could do no more than help her to the discovery that it was needed.

The cousins set out together that evening for the school-room, Clement giving himself the airs of a victim, and Joyce ruthlessly determined that he should endure everything that was to be endured. She would not see his piteously appealing expression when the Miss Allens took him under their especial patronage, and poured out their admiration of his voice, and their fears that Mr. Maynard might be a *little* too severe in his choice of music. When he had effected an escape, he watched with

amusement his cousin's small, resolute figure standing by the harmonium, and evidently making her steady influence felt upon the rather discursively inclined assemblage. With less knowledge of music than either of the assistants, she gave more useful help than any of the others; so that when Mr. Clayton arrived towards the end of the hour, he found actual practice going on, and even the Miss Allens toned down to sober work. His hearty sympathy always acted as a stimulus, and sent them away in spirits. Mr. Maynard could not but be aware for how much he was indebted to Joyce, and made her a little formal speech to that effect; and on their way home, in answer to her father's inquiring 'Well?' she looked up with a bright, eager smile.

'We mean to be a grand success, papa. Walter Brett really has a capital voice.'

'How did you manage your own?'

'Opened my mouth and sang mutely. My croak would have been too prominent among so few to have passed unnoticed. But I think you might offer Clement a small salary if he would take a permanent place in the choir.'

'Thank you. I can only say, Joyce, I am glad you don't live at the Rectory. However, I am magnanimous enough to congratulate you. You acted like the fairy Order whom I learnt to respect in my childhood.'

Joyce laughed; the subject was changed, and she chatted as pleasantly and intelligently about the last Academy Exhibition as if singing-classes and parochial troubles had never existed. She thoroughly enjoyed that evening, when she could listen to conversation she liked, and hear politics discussed with some difference of opinion, and yet with thorough cordiality of expression.

Clement wished them all good-bye that evening. He was obliged to start in the middle of the night, his cousin declared, in order to catch the early steamer for Dieppe ; and as he intended returning by a different route, they were not likely soon to see him again. But he suggested to Joyce that there was the Elmwood invitation remaining open for herself.





## CHAPTER VII.

### A NEW FRIENDSHIP.

Oh, boy! of such as thou are oftenest made  
Earth's fragile idols; like a tender flower,  
No strength in all thy freshness, prone to fade,  
And bending weakly to the thunder-shower;  
Still, round the loved thy heart found force to bind,  
And clung like woodbine shaken in the wind!

HON. MRS. NORTON.



T. SWITHIN was favourable, and Clement Blunt had a delightful passage. When he landed, his first step was to procure breakfast, for he felt a conviction that a hungry young Englishman would scarcely prove a welcome visitor to his aunt at such an hour of the morning. His next was to find out her house, and in this he had little difficulty. He turned up a little passage at the back of the hotel, stopped for a few minutes to look at the exquisite ivory carvings in the shops, and found himself in the main street. Referring to a letter in his pocket, and asking his way in French so perfect that the man he accosted was left in a state of bewilderment between Clement's appearance and accent, he soon

found himself under the dark arch which led the unwary visitor over broken pavement and hidden pitfalls into the Sansons' house. He stumbled through a narrow passage into the open court already mentioned, and knocking at the door of the little glazed room, was immediately confronted by Madame Sanson.

It is impossible to conceive anything greater than her surprise in hearing a strange gentleman ask, in a voice as calm as if it were an every-day occurrence, for Madame d'Aurigny.

'Is it Madame you want—Madame?'

'She lives here, does she not?' said Clement, smiling at the evident astonishment his demand created.

'But yes—yes, certainly. Is Monsieur acquainted with her?'

'I am a relation.'

'A relation!' Madame's hands, shoulders, eyes, were all in movement. 'She has so few friends; Monsieur does not come from these parts?'

It was plain that Mr. Blunt's history would be extracted before any corresponding information was bestowed in return, and he resigned himself good-humouredly to his fate.

'No, indeed,' he said; 'I have just come from England.'

'From England! Ah-h-h! that accounts for Monsieur's foreign air; but yet he speaks altogether like a Frenchman?'

'I am half a Frenchman, if that will explain the mystery.'

'And a relation of Madame's? Does she expect Monsieur?'

Mr. Blunt grew impatient. 'Upon my word,' he thought, 'I had better adopt a little counter-questioning. My aunt does not expect me; will you kindly let her know that I am here?'

'Your aunt! Monsieur is Madame's own nephew! Is it possible!'

'Can I see her?' continued poor Clement, in despair

'Sanson,' cried Madame, running nimbly back to her hus-



band, 'figure to yourself, there is a gentleman, beautiful as a picture, describing himself as our Madame's nephew.'

'Come,' said Clement to himself, 'this won't do. At the rate we are going on, I shall spend a few hours in detailing my history. I had better go up at once, while this wonderful little old woman is in her glass house. What a magnificent staircase! If my aunt's rooms are *en suite*, the cottage will offer few attractions.'

He ran upstairs, and knocked gently at the door which opened on the landing. Receiving no answer, he tried again and again, but without better success. Finally, he turned the handle of the door. It was locked, and he uttered an exclamation of disappointment. 'She must be out; how tiresome! and what wonderfully early hours she keeps. It puts me in something of a fix, since, if I go down again, I shall be an hour in extracting a definite answer from that old woman; and if there is a thing I can't stand, it is the not getting a plain answer to a plain question. Ah, here she comes again,' as a shrill 'Monsieur!' was heard ascending from the court. 'I shall go up another stage, and see what I can hear there.'

The second stage was like the first, and Clement, pausing a moment to look up at the blue sky, and to note the peculiarities of the staircase, knocked again at a door exactly resembling that which he had unsuccessfully tried below. This time he had better fortune; a languid voice said, '*Entrez*,' and he found himself confronting a low couch, on which lay a boy looking so fragile and unearthly, that Clement absolutely started at the sight.

Louis was as much astonished as his visitor. He raised himself on his arm, and stared in wonder, until the gentleman, recovering himself, said with a short laugh, 'I beg your pardon. I am altogether in a strange land here, and you will be doing



*Clement at the sick-bed of Louis.*



me a kindness to direct me. I am in search of Madame d'Aurigny.'

'Ah,' said the boy, quietly, 'I am sorry for that ; for Madame is absent from home.'

'Absent? I thought she never left this house.'

'She has not for many years ; but, two days ago, she went to Rouen.'

Clement looked and felt terribly disconcerted. 'Is she really gone?' he said, with an effort to be incredulous.

Louis smiled. 'My sister is gone with her. I suppose you are one of Madame's English relations?'

'Yes,' said Clement, in a pondering tone. He was thinking that he had got into an old enchanted castle, and that here was the captive knight laid under a spell in the turret-chamber. There was something in the house unlike the ordinary places where he found himself ; and Louis' refined, delicate face belonged more to shadow-land than reality. 'I beg your pardon,' he said, rousing himself, and aware that the lad's eyes were fixed upon him in surprise ; but do you live here by yourself?'

'No, no, indeed,' said Louis, with a smile, which broke out involuntarily at the idea ; 'I have Ursule—my sister. Only, as I tell you, she has gone to Rouen with Madame. Monsieur must be much vexed to come so far in vain. They will not be absent many days.'

'Ah!' said Clement, brightening. 'Then matters might be worse after all. My poor boy, you must be very desolate ; who takes care of you?' he continued, in a tone of compassion.

'Oh, I have Madame Sanson—our good Madame down-stairs.'

'The little old woman who asks questions?'

'I dare say it puzzled her to see you,' said Louis, understanding the state of the case in a moment.

'Well,' said Mr. Blunt, laughing, 'I ought not to blame her; for I feel as if I must ask a great many questions myself before my ideas can be cleared of cloud. You are sure I am not tiring you?'

He was himself so strong and vigorous that it shocked him to see how fragile the boy looked, and how his cheek flushed with the slight exertion of talking; but there was no mistaking the tone of pleasure in which Louis answered,

'No, indeed. Pray do not go.'

'First of all, then, tell me your name.'

'Louis Lafon.'

'Mine is Blunt—Clement Blunt. Now we shall know one another better. And—and have you been long ill?'

He had not intended questioning the boy about himself; but there was a strange fascination to him in the sweet, almost womanly expression, unlike anything he had seen before.

'I have always been as I am.' It was said quite simply, and without any attempt at self-pity; and Clement felt as if it would be almost an impertinence for himself to venture upon anything of the kind.

'Then you know my aunt well?'

'Madame d'Aurigny? Oh, yes.'

'What is she like?—I have never seen her.'

'Nor I, Monsieur. I can only imagine her through Ursule's description.'

'Surely we are not meaning the same person! I thought she lived here?'

'It is quite true; but Monsieur sees I remain up here always.'

'She can come up, I suppose?'

Louis laughed merrily. 'Monsieur does not, indeed, know Madame! She has never been up here in her life.'

Clement began to make up his mind to be astonished by nothing in this strange house. His eye was caught by the sketches, and he fell to speculating whose they could be. The pictures and the delicately featured boy were equally out of keeping with the bare, poorly furnished room ; nor did he sufficiently take into account the refining power of illness. He was, however, so much afraid of this, to him, unknown enemy, that it alarmed him to see the tired look in Louis' face ; and he got up hastily to go, promising to return in the afternoon.

There was not much chance of successfully avoiding being caught at the foot of the stairs by Madame, whose little round figure, indeed, was keeping watch at her door ; but Clement was beginning to understand the state of affairs better, and was not unwilling to spend a little time in answering the remainder of her questions, and in listening to her shrewd remarks. She took care to impress him with her views on the subject of her lodgers, acknowledging, at the same time, that Madame d'Aurigny had her good points, and was much to be pitied.

'She has eaten her own heart, poor thing, so long, that there is not too much left. Well, well, we all laugh at this one, and find fault with that ; but I sometimes say to Jules, "You have your chocolate, and your soup, and your claret, and no wonder that you are amiable and satisfied ; and I have my market, and my little gossip, and my house to look after, and the children up-stairs almost as good as my own, and how can we know what those poor things feel who are without any such distractions ?'

Clement felt as if there was some reproach to him in the words, although he had frequently tried to induce his mother to take measures for communication with her sister, and in vain.

She told him, querulously, that one day she intended to go herself, and meanwhile he need say no more. That day had never, and now would never, come, and the two separated lives grew more apart each year. Clement was a good son ; he felt a desire, in some manner, to make up for his mother's neglect, more and more so, as he extracted from Madame the particulars of his aunt's mode of life, and felt that only rigid poverty could produce such absolute absence of comfort. Madame, on her part, lost her affections to the healthy-looking young Englishman ; she embedded him at once in a soft, romantic little corner of her heart, which had been vacant ever since Pierre Renait's prudent but inconstant conduct had made her secretly indignant against him, while outwardly she was loud in his praises. There was a steadfast look in Clement Blunt's eyes, very different from Pierre's rather shifting expression.

But, as he went out of the archway into the sunny, busy street again, the gravity stole over his face which was most habitual to it ; whether it was owing to living so much alone, as far as his inner life was concerned, or to the continual self-control which he required to exercise over his temper. He walked quickly on, although there was no cause for hurry, and he found himself by-and-by on the high land behind the old castle, and obliged to make rather an adventurous descent in order to reach the beach. A high westerly wind and a brilliant sun made the scene there as bright and animated as it was possible for it to be. The sea was of that peculiar green tint so often noticeable at Dieppe, growing darker and darker towards the horizon. The waves tossed themselves into white breakers, not angrily, but as if in play with the sea-birds which dipped gracefully into the foam, their wings becoming silvery in the sunshine. Two women were chattering busily over their occupation, that

of spreading nets to dry upon the stones ; one of them wore a high white cap, scarlet petticoat, blue shawl and apron ; children were shouting merrily against the wind, and the waves rolled noisily up the shingle. It was anything but a solitary resort, for far on to where the long pier, with its beacon-tower, ran out to sea at the entrance to the harbour, men, women, and children, of all ages and classes, were dotted over the shore ; one or two ladies had sat down to enjoy the air, sheltering themselves from the wind behind umbrellas. Something in the strong salt wind, in the clear atmosphere, and the bright colours provoked cheerfulness ; even the great boats, which in various stages of building and dismantlement were dragged up on the beach, were decked with flags to make their gaunt ribs look less gloomy. The sea was dotted all over with fishing-boats as far as the eye could reach, part of the fleet of which the town is justly proud. Looking in the other direction, away from Dieppe, the white cliffs seemed to Clement almost provokingly home-like, so closely did they resemble the English coast ; and he needed to turn round and reconsider the most picturesque of the costumes to assure himself that he was indeed in a foreign country.

Clement Blunt deserved high praise for the manner in which he had toiled away in a small country office, first giving up his favourite dream of entering the army, and then relinquishing all hope of the bar, because his mother could not endure to think of the time he must then necessarily have spent in London. It is possible that he might have risen high in that profession, as his quickness and readiness were great ; but, if his talents did not meet with fair play in his position at Defforton, the advantage to his moral character had been incalculable. He had gained the comparative steadiness of application and regularity



in work, which was what he most needed, and without which it is probable that all his more brilliant qualities would have failed; and he learned to reason closely, instead of doing no more than jumping at intuitions with feminine quickness and feminine want of logic.

He was thinking now of his home—thinking of the father who had been at once father and dearest friend, and whose loss every day of his life made only more apparent; thinking of the weariness, and disappointment, and want of sympathy that he felt too often now, as he had never before felt—of the brothers and sisters who had come before him, one by one taken away in infancy and childhood. It was not often that he had leisure time so thoroughly unoccupied as the present, and he sat down on the shingle and buried his head in his hands. That he suffered greatly from the struggle to reconcile his mother's capricious and jealous temper with the duty and affection he owed to her, any kind clear-headed friend who lived on the spot would have easily seen; but, unfortunately, there was no one exactly in the position to remark or to help him in his trouble. Mr. Clayton had a better idea of it than any other person; but even he had not seen Clement and his mother together since Mr. Blunt's death, and did not know what a constant fret was imposed upon the young man's spirits. At times the longing to break away had proved almost irresistible, the more so when he allowed himself to think that he would really gain a great deal which now was to all appearance denied him. Mrs. Blunt was one of those persons with whom it is the present, and not the absent, who are always in the wrong; those who were separated from her by death or absence she endowed with all the virtues she had denied to them when they were near her. It was not that she did not love her one

remaining son, but it was that the habit of her life impelled her to continual fault-finding.

Failures on Clement's part there had been—many and great failures—which had caused him hours of shame and self-reproach; but none the less had he fought his way through sharp struggles to a victory over self more complete than he himself believed, and it was no undeserved praise which the neighbours gave when they spoke of him emphatically as a good son.

Nevertheless, it was always a time of trial when he ventured upon a comparison between the Claytons' home and his own.

There are hours in a man's life when nature speaks more plainly than books, and something of the feeling came to Clement Blunt when he lifted his head and looked out over the water on that exquisite summer morning. The great boundless sea swept away petty repinings and discontent into full, deep assurance of the protecting Love which permits all things to be ennobled for its sake; the bright sunlight called up hope; even the clouds only brought the thought that they were but fleeting vapours, permitted for a time to dim the brightness. I suppose that few men, or women either, can look, as Clement looked, at sea and sky and remain wholly unmoved. He drew his breath deeply; and when at last he rose up to go, it was with the thankful feeling that strength had been sent to him in that hour of silent teaching.

He went back to the hotel, engaged rooms there for a few days, wrote letters during the remainder of the morning, and, when the afternoon came, set off according to his promise to see Louis again. The boy interested him more than he could account for, and called up all his feelings of compassion. He made up his mind that Ursule was a giddy girl, thinking only of her own pleasures so that she was ready to leave her brother

in his suffering and solitude, and set off without compunction to enjoy herself. It did not alter his opinion to hear the mingled pride and love with which Louis expatiated upon her.

'She is so fresh, so bright, so graceful, no one would ever suppose her to be my sister,' said he, enthusiastically. 'I cannot tell you how strange it seems to me to talk of Ursule to any one who does not know her. Everything comes to me through her, if you understand.'

'Yes, indeed, my poor boy!'

Louis' cheek flushed. 'Do not pity me for that,' he said. 'It is a hundred times better to enjoy it with her.'

'Ursule is a strange name,' Mr. Blunt said, ponderingly, 'and yet it seems familiar to me in some shape or other.'

'It is a name which has long belonged to us. My mother's mother was called Ursule.'

'It is not possible, then, that I can know it as in any way connected with you,' said Clement, smiling; 'but it certainly strikes me as having to do with something which I ought to remember and cannot. Now I want to speak about yourself. Do you never see a doctor?'

'I have not seen one for a long time. Doctors can do me no good, Monsieur.'

'You cannot be sure of that,' Clement said, a little peremptorily; 'and your sister ought to take care that you have the chance.'

Louis was greatly distressed. 'You do not know Ursule!' he exclaimed; and this shadow of blame gave him such evident pain, that Mr. Blunt avoided, through the rest of the visit, expressing anything which seemed to reproach her with neglect, although in his own mind he still charged her with it.

'Well,' he said soothingly, 'I dare say she and you are both

so used to your state that you think nothing can alter it. But skilful surgeons do wonders ;' and he went on to narrate the particulars of a case with which he was acquainted, in which a boy a year or two younger than Louis had received a wonderful cure under the hands of a famous medical man. Glancing up as he drew towards the end of his story, and expecting to find the large dark eyes bent eagerly upon him, he was struck with the look of patient resignation which he met instead. He had hoped to rouse the boy into hopefulness, but he had evidently not succeeded, and he stumbled hastily over his last words to ask, 'What do you think of that?'

'How thankful his mother must have been!'

'But about yourself; why should not the same treatment be successful?'

Louis answered him, without a trace of agitation in his voice, 'Because it is too late.'

'How can you tell? Every means ought to be tried——'

'I wonder if I could tell you,' interrupted Louis, with more emotion: 'I do not speak of it to Ursule, and there is no one else. To tell anything to Madame is a sure means of having it known. But sometimes I feel a longing, a craving, to speak to some one. I ought to be able to bear my own burden, but I am so weak——'

'Tell me anything; it shall be quite safe,' said Clement, compassionately, as the boy stopped.

'Yes; I see that in your face. Well, it is not much; it is only poor Ursule who will be the worse. But you talked to me about getting well, and I know, I feel, that I am dying. It is better, sometimes, to put it into plain words,' he went on hurriedly, seeing that Clement looked shocked and was trying to speak. 'And I do not fear it now. I used to fancy that

one day I might get better, and then it seemed hard, and made me impatient. Now that I feel how mistaken I was, and that at the best I could be no more than what I am, I know that it is all mercy.'

His voice was quite calm, and as he concluded there came over his face such a look of peace and trustfulness that Mr. Blunt dared not at once disturb it. But in a minute or two he said, hesitatingly,

'Madame Sanson does not think you more ill than usual?'

'No. There is nothing especially the matter; only I know that every day I become weaker. It is very strange that I should have told you all this,' said Louis, with a smile at his new friend.

'It is much more strange that you should have kept this feeling to yourself, and that no one should have been able to find it out,' Clement said warmly. 'But now you must let me take you in hand. I shall bring a doctor to see you to-morrow morning. Hush! you must say nothing against it; it will be my affair, not yours. I must have something to employ myself about while I am waiting for Madame d'Aurigny; and if we can set you up—who knows?—it will be worth staying longer for.'

Louis shook his head, but did not oppose him further; and Clement turned the conversation, talking on to the boy about England and English matters in a manner which, while it amused, did not fatigue him by calling for much reply. In the little he said, he was surprised to find thought beyond his years, and to discover that the books he had read, though few, were good of their kind. Clement was half provoked at the manner in which everything was referred to Ursule, against whom his prejudices deepened the more, as he charged her in his own mind with blindness and indifference to her brother's condition.

The morrow came, and with it Mr. Blunt and the doctor. The latter was a man of few words: he asked certain questions, prescribed more nourishment than medicine, and said no more till Clement was alone with him in the street. Even then he showed his opinion more by a quick characteristic gesture than by anything else; but it was unmistakable, and Clement felt that Louis' words were confirmed.

'Is he so ill?' he asked, much shocked.

'There is nothing—no constitution left.'

'No hope?'

Monsieur Pelletier shrugged his shoulders again.

'But not immediate danger?'

'Certainly not. It is not definite illness, but gradual sinking.'

Clement went back to Louis, dreading the questioning that he might have to undergo. He need not have feared: beyond a glance in his face when he entered, the boy asked nothing. He was perfectly patient and obedient, took what had been prescribed, and looked so animated and interested over some school reminiscences which Clement rubbed up for his benefit, that the latter began to persuade himself that the doctor was an old fool, and only gave up the case because he wanted the skill to treat with it.

Day after day Mr. Blunt spent hours in Louis' room. He smiled to himself more than once at the unexpected attraction he had found in the old house at Dieppe, partly owing, no doubt, to the new pleasure of being looked and longed for as he never before had been in his life. Louis was thoroughly happy in his visits, rested on the older man's stronger character, admiring it even when it showed sternness; listened unweariedly to his thoughts and opinions—which Mr. Blunt found himself detailing with an openness which astonished himself—and in

his turn expatiated upon Ursule's excellences, or hesitatingly ventured to ask questions upon problems which had never yet been solved.

So the two lived on, perfectly contented with each other. Madame could not do enough to show her delight in the young Englishman who had thus opportunely come to cheer her boy's loneliness; for Pierre, although since Ursule's departure he had ventured once to go up and see his friend, was no longer dependable, and, indeed, between his misery and his satisfaction, which were now pretty well balanced in his heart, was not a very agreeable companion for any one. Clement was moved not merely by pity, but by real interest in the boy's character. It was, perhaps, too feminine and sensitive for healthy, manly work in the world; but this strain was never to be put upon it, and it was most lovable in its purity and perfect gentleness. If the life had borne its struggle—as what life does not?—it seemed to have left no scars to mark it, and, through all the weakness and suffering, there was an expression of unruffled peace upon the beautiful boyish face to be traced even in his worst moments of pain.

There was as yet no change in his habits. Clement sometimes fancied that, at whatever cost to himself, he was bent upon no outward change being perceptible to Ursule when she returned. He still lay upon the little couch: when the day was very fine, he persuaded Clement to lift him into the balcony; nay, he still continued to paint Ursule's little cherry-girl, which he had begun before she went away, although more than once dropping the brush from exhaustion. Her letters were his great delight, so full and tender that Mr. Blunt's unfair prejudices almost melted away before them, and describing every incident of their journey sufficiently at length for her brother to be made

acquainted with the minutest particulars, while the very fidelity of her descriptions rendered them picturesque. They were as fresh as Ursule herself; for she had scarcely written a letter in her life before, and wrote as she spoke, with a good many faults of expression, but a bright charm of originality to compensate for them. In his answers Louis had been asked by Clement to desire Ursule to keep his coming unknown to Madame.

Mr. Blunt and Louis were sitting together as usual one morning. Not many words had passed between them, for each was taken up with thinking over letters received that day. Louis' was, of course, from Ursule, and was the last. That day she and Madame d'Aurigny were to return; and he lay back with a look of calm rest upon his face, such as Clement remarked and envied. His own letter was from his mother, full of blame for remaining away so long a time, of indignation with her sister for her absence, and of a recapitulation of the inconvenience to herself in not having her son with her. It was written in French, the old familiar language which she liked to talk and write with him, and it contained one injunction:—'Who is this Mademoiselle Ursule Lafon, whom you mention as travelling with your aunt? Find out.' Clement read it, and would have asked a question or two to gain the information she required, but that, glancing up at the moment, he saw Louis looking so absorbed that he did not like to interrupt him, and went on with his letter instead. The inquiry did not seem to him of any great consequence, but Mrs. Blunt was peremptory, and would be sure to need an answer; he made up his mind, therefore, to ask Louis, by-and-by, for more particulars about his family.

Clement felt that his visit was drawing to an end. The object of his journey was to induce Madame d'Aurigny to join her



sister in England, and from what he gathered from Louis and Madame Sanson he believed that there was little chance of success. Either way, he could not himself linger much longer, and the thought struck him with regret. His few days of quiet life had been very pleasant to him ; for to be with one so gentle and so single-minded as Louis was in itself a refreshment, and the surrounding atmosphere was a thorough change from that of his own home. It was hard to believe that his visit had been so short as was really the fact ; but now, if anything reconciled him to its being brought to a close, it was the prospect of Ursule's return. He felt as if it must put an end to the quiet, close intimacy into which, in spite of the disparity of years, Louis and he had fallen, and with a sigh he made up his mind that this present peaceful morning would be the last.

Looking up at Louis to say something of the sort, he saw that he was asleep. It was not unusual, for his nights were disturbed, and short snatches of day-sleep frequently made his principal rest. Clement stole out of the room on tiptoe, having something to say to Madame. But he had not reached the bottom of the stairs before he became aware that something was seriously amiss in the little glass room. He hurried to the door, saw Monsieur standing with a fork in one hand and a saucepan in the other, the very picture of helpless bewilderment ; and Madame, good-tempered, light-hearted Madame, actually crying as if her heart would break.

As soon as she perceived Clement, her sobs redoubled.

'Oh, Monsieur, such news, such terrible news! Jules, why do you not inform Monsieur, when you see it is beyond me?'

'Terrible news, Monsieur,' repeated her husband, like an obedient parrot, waving his head and the saucepan at the same time.

‘What has happened?’

But Madame only went into another fit of sobs, and Mr. Blunt began to fear that he would never receive any information, when she, suddenly checked herself, told Jules to put the things upon the stove, and then showed a little scrap of scrawled-upon paper which she had been all the while crumpling in her hand.

‘Monsieur knows that Madame, his aunt, and Ursule were to return this day?’

‘Yes—well?’

‘There has been a frightful accident—frightful!’ repeated Madame, becoming excited again.

‘An accident! To the train?’

‘To the train.’

‘How do you know? What have you heard? Who is hurt?’

‘Hurt, Monsieur? They are all either hurt or killed. Oh, my poor dear child!’

Clement turned pale, but he was lawyer enough to know that so sweeping an assertion contradicted itself. ‘Impossible!’ he exclaimed. ‘Has that slip of paper anything to do with the matter. Pray let me know everything as quickly as possible. There is that poor boy to be thought of. Good Heavens, how terrible!’

‘Oh, is it not, Monsieur? And I just getting poor Madame’s room ready for her; and I persuaded her to go!’

‘Let me see,’ repeated Clement, impatiently, holding out his hand for the paper. ‘Why,’ he exclaimed, glancing rapidly over it, ‘this is from Mademoiselle Lafon herself. She is not killed, at all events.’

‘No, Monsieur,’ returned Madame, a little indignantly; ‘but look at the writing, and judge what her condition must be.’

‘Oh, that is nothing,’ said Mr. Blunt, much relieved. ‘I dare

say she was shaken enough. She says she is unhurt herself, and that she hardly knows as yet what injury my poor aunt has received. How did this come?

‘Auguste Pasquier brought it here. He was one of the poor creatures in this horrible train.’

And, by little and little, it came out that the accident, whatever it was, had occurred at no great distance from Dieppe, and that as soon as possible those who were comparatively unhurt had been forwarded to their destination. Ursule had seen a face she recognised among the frightened passengers, and had entreated him to take a few hastily scribbled lines to the Sansons, hoping by this means that a positive assurance of her safety would reach Louis before he had time to be alarmed. If she was, as she twice repeated, unhurt, she was evidently sorely shaken and confused, and could scarcely write coherently. Clement’s first impulse was to hurry to the station; then he remembered that, in Louis’ condition, it was scarcely prudent to leave the task of breaking the tidings to Madame’s discretion, and he resolved to carry the note to him himself. Directly he saw him, he perceived that he must use great caution; for Louis’ eyes were fixed eagerly upon the door, as if a strange secret sympathy told him that something was wrong. Mr. Blunt at once put the note into his hands.

‘This is from your sister herself,’ he said; ‘it is to tell you that the train has been delayed, and that she is quite unhurt, although there has been a sort of accident.’

The boy’s hand trembled so much that he could scarcely hold the paper.

‘Poor Madame is injured?’ he said, looking up with a horror-struck expression.

‘I fear so; but it may not be much. Of course, she is

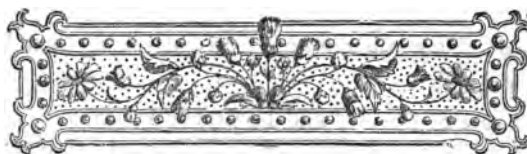
frightened. I am going at once, and shall bring them back as soon as possible.'

'Take care of Ursule,' said Louis, faintly.

'Take care of yourself, my boy; that is the best thing you can do for her.'

His heart smote him at having to leave him, but he felt he could not linger. He begged Madame to go up at once and cheer him; and she, having rapidly recovered from the shock of her first impressions, was likely to prove a hopeful comforter.





## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE ACCIDENT.

Who knows, when he to go from home  
Departeth from his door,  
Or when, or how, he back shall come,  
Or whether never more?  
For some who walk abroad in health,  
In sickness back are brought;  
And some who have gone forth with wealth,  
Have back return'd with nought.

GEORGE WITHERS.

**T**HE station was in a state of suppressed excitement, and Mr. Blunt found it impossible to do more than pick up atoms of information, often contradictory; for the officials were too busy to answer questions, even from those most deeply interested in the sufferers, and the utmost they ever permitted themselves to say was to the effect that they hoped the accident was not so serious as had at first been feared.

Eager white-faced inquirers crowded into the station as the tidings became more widely spread; wives, mothers, children, huddled together crying and talking, waiting for the train which

was momentarily expected to bring in more of the victims, or for that which was to start immediately after its arrival for the scene of the disaster. A young husband, whose wife had been in the train, paced frantically up and down the platform ; porters hurried by the groups, whose misery they disliked encountering with nothing of comfort to offer ; one or two doctors came quickly into the station, Louis' M. Pelletier among them. Presently the train came in, and a general rush was made to the spot. Clement stood on one side to let the women look eagerly into the carriages. Even to himself, the anxiety of the moment was sickening ; what must it be to them ? He touched the doctor's arm, and asked him to point out Ursule Lafon, if he saw her ; but it seemed almost a superfluous precaution, for he felt sure he should recognise her and Madame d'Aurigny by instinct. A great white-capped fish-woman pushed past him, the basket on her back almost striking his face. She was searching for her husband, and Clement never forgot the look of agony in her eyes when she had convinced herself he was not there. Not very many passengers got out, and the greater number had received hurts of some kind, although in several cases these were but slight : almost all looked pale and scared, and scarcely able to respond to the joyful greetings which were lavished upon them. The young husband found his wife ; but when he poured out a torrent of rapturous delight, she burst into tears, as if the reaction were more than she could bear ; and the doctors were obliged to interfere to prevent the shattered sufferers from being overwhelmed by the heart-rending questions and lamentations of those whose friends were still among the missing.

Presently, and as soon as the excitement had a little subsided, it was found out that the train was going to start on its return

journey to the scene of the accident. Clement jumped into a carriage where were a gendarme, a couple of men in blouses, M. Pelletier, and two or three women. As the train moved slowly off, even the most vehement grew quiet. Those next the windows stretched out their heads, as if already expecting to see traces of what had happened ; one of the women—the wife, as Clement afterwards discovered, of the stoker—sat with her hands clasped, mute and rigid with terror ; another, recovering from the first awe, began to pour out prophecies and surmises to her neighbour. The sun was shining, the English-looking orchards and hedge-rows were steeped in the delicious quiet of a summer afternoon ; the women at work in the fields looked calmly up at the train as it dashed past them, unconscious of what had come to pass, not many miles away from their peaceful homes.

Once the speed slackened ; the women shrank together. Clement looked inquiringly at M. Pelletier, who had been occupying himself with making notes in a pocket-book. He shook his head as he caught the Englishman's eye.

‘We have not gone the distance yet. Monsieur is interested in some one?’

‘My aunt, I fear, is injured ; she is travelling with the young girl with whom Monsieur is acquainted—Mademoiselle Lafon.’

‘Ah !’

The doctor went back to his pocket-book ; silence fell upon all, even upon the least affected. A few more miles of trees and fields, and windmills crowning the highest points, and the train slackened speed again, went slowly, more slowly, stopped. The gendarme and the doctor kept back the women, who were for pressing out. No one was allowed to descend until the guard came to give leave, nor could anything be seen from the

windows, crowded as they were with anxious faces. When at length they were released, they found there was still a little distance to walk before the spot was reached. A few set off running; others hung back as if they could not face their fears. Clement pushed on with the doctor.

They came upon the scene at last. The engine lying on its side, buried deep in the soft earth of the embankment, all the green grass blackened and scorched by the water from the boiler; the carriages, some standing erect and untouched, others pounded into a thousand pieces; great wheels sticking out of shattered planks; rails torn up and bent, telegraph wires twisted round fragments of carriages. The doctor hurried on.

'Plenty of work for us here,' he said to Clement. 'What an accident!'

What an accident, indeed! It was very simply explained afterwards: a little carelessness on the part of some workmen, and the train ran off the line. It had happened three hours before, and the greater part of those who were in the carriages had been removed to a farm-house fortunately near; some had not yet been extricated; only one was known to be dead—the stoker. One of the officials hurriedly told them this. Two medical men were at the farm-house; and he thought that *monsieur le docteur* would do well to stay and give assistance to the poor creatures who were yet to be got out. He showed them where the workmen were labouring at great masses of splintered fragments, and they hastened to the spot. One man was released just as they reached it: the doctor poured brandy down his throat, and superintended placing him on a rude kind of litter, which had already served to carry others to the house. The remaining sufferer was a woman whom the men did not believe to be much crushed, although a large



piece of machinery had fallen in such a manner as to render the task of extricating her extremely long and difficult. The instant Clement saw that a young girl was standing by her side with a face of the utmost distress, by turns encouraging her and imploring the workmen to be careful, he guessed who it was. The next moment, the doctor touched his arm, and said,

‘*Tenez*, there is Mademoiselle Ursule!’

This was no time for explanations; it is doubtful whether Ursule would have understood him had he attempted them, for she had eyes and ears only for one object. He could but aid her by joining the men, and, under the doctor’s directions, working with all his might at the rescue. Poor Madame d’Aurigny was not sensible throughout; at times she appeared conscious of her situation, and then, with a groan, would close her eyes again: when at length she was released, and the men stood wiping the big drops from their foreheads, Ursule would have passionately embraced her; but the doctor put her aside, not unkindly, but with an air of prompt decision.

‘Perfect quiet, if you please, Mademoiselle! You will do best now by going as fast as you can to the farm, and seeing that all is ready by the time we arrive. Monsieur will remain here to assist.’

She had the good sense to be obedient, although the strain upon and shock to her nerves had been so great that she felt and moved like one in a dream. It was not until she was close upon the house that she became conscious that her dress was torn and slit in all directions, and that her whole body ached with a dull dead pain. The mistress of the farm, a kindly faced woman in a snowy high cap, ran out to meet her before she had crossed the yard, and kissed her in the hearty, tearful eagerness of her welcome.

‘Oh, you poor child!’ said she, ‘what must you not have gone through! Come in—come in! Yes, I know all about it; have they got out the poor creature?—there is a place waiting for her, and the best of doctors. Come, and let me see to yourself.’

But Ursule refused all assistance until she had seen Madame d’Aurigny brought in and laid on a mattress, and had undressed her and heard M. Pelletier’s report. She had escaped wonderfully, in his opinion, as far as yet could be told; but he was not altogether sure that she had not received an injury of some sort to the back, and this, of however slight a description, became a serious matter when her age was taken into account. Restoratives had entirely brought back consciousness; but she was in a painfully nervous and restless state, and for two or three hours Ursule could do nothing but attempt to soothe her, until M. Pelletier, coming in again to visit her, and a little girl of about twelve years old, who was the other occupant of the tiny room, administered some quieting medicine, and she fell into an unbroken sleep.

Nurses had been telegraphed for, as well as doctors. One, in the dress of a Sister of Charity, came softly in to take Ursule’s place; and the girl, exhausted herself, and longing to know more of the condition of her fellow-travellers, stole on tiptoe out of the room.

The whitewashed, red-tiled farm was put to its utmost to meet these unexpected and sad demands upon its hospitality. Twelve persons had found refuge there, of whom at least eight were more or less seriously injured, and friends, doctors, and nurses added to the numbers. The good mistress and her three daughters worked unceasingly to supply all that was needed: no one could do enough to show their pity and sympathy. The

kitchen, with its goodly ranks of shining dishes, had been hastily fitted up with beds and palliasses; the best linen dragged sweet and fresh out of the great press for the use of the sufferers. Rough men moved noiselessly about; a big, fierce-looking, bearded gendarme tenderly dandled a little child before its mother's eyes, that she might assure herself of its safety. All the windows were set open; the soft, pure air stole in, just stirring the blind; the sunlight fell in golden streaks upon the stained deal floor, and outside the cows were lowing impatiently because milking-time had come and passed.

Jeanne, Dorothée, and Louise, healthy, honest-looking girls, were greatly interested in Ursule, who was of about the same age as themselves. The state of her dress and her white face horrified them, and Dorothée was at once for carrying her off to her own room and lending her some clothes.

'Let me stay one moment,' pleaded Ursule earnestly; 'I want to know how they all are. Who is in this room?'

'We cannot go in there,' said Dorothée, in a frightened whisper, laying her hand upon the lock, lest Ursule should open the door; '*he* is there, and the poor wife, too.'

'He? Who?'

'The stoker—the poor man who was killed.'

'Ah!'

Ursule said no more, but suffered herself to be drawn away: she had not heard of this one death, and it shocked her inexpressibly. She followed her guide through a long passage which led to another part of the house, when they were stopped by the mother's voice calling Dorothée in imperative accents.

'How tiresome!' said the girl, hurriedly. 'However, my mother will not keep me. Wait for me one moment. There, sit in this window-seat until I come back.'

Ursule sat down as she was told: she was so weary that she could not object to anything. She rested her arms upon the sill and looked out. The country was too level to be picturesque in form, but it possessed a smiling summer beauty of its own—undulating fields of corn just beginning to be touched with yellow ripeness, orchards nestling round the house, a glimmer of water in the distance, long shadows and rich ruddy sunset lights on earth and sky. It was all there, but she could see nothing of it—nothing but the one scene that seemed to be branded upon her mind, and to grow more distinct every moment. She shut her eyes—in vain: she saw only the more clearly that dreadful, shattered heap of splinters, and the faces of deadly terror surrounding her. She had never in her life fainted, but she was very nearly doing so now, and only a determined effort prevented it. Suddenly some one addressed her.

‘How is Madame d’Aurigny?’ said the voice.

‘Asleep,’ answered Ursule, mechanically.

‘I am afraid that you are suffering yourself, Mademoiselle’

‘Oh, that is nothing. At least,’ said she, standing up and pushing back her hair with both hands, ‘one must suffer when one thinks of it.’

She fancied he was one of the doctors, until, glancing up, it struck her with a dull wonder that she had seen his face before. Suddenly she exclaimed,

‘Ah, now I remember! Was it not you who were so good in helping us?’

‘I had the best of reasons,’ said Clement, smiling; ‘I am Madame d’Aurigny’s nephew.’

‘Her nephew! What? are you the Monsieur Blunt of whom Louis writes? Oh, Monsieur, then you have seen Louis?’

‘Yes, indeed, Mademoiselle; I have been sitting with him

this morning. I was with him, indeed, when your little note was brought.'

'And was he frightened?—did he understand? Oh, Monsieur, why did you come away?—I beg your pardon; I forgot.'

'He has your note, remember. And about his hearing to-night?'

'Ah, yes; what can we do?'

'I will tell you. M. Pelletier returns to Dieppe this evening, and has promised to take charge of a message from you. Or, if you think you can write a few lines, it might be better. Here is a slip of paper,' continued Clement, tearing a page out of a pocket-book.

She thanked him gratefully, and managed with some difficulty to write a few words to repeat the assurance of her own safety.

'M. Pelletier will see Louis himself,' said Mr. Blunt, 'and can explain the state of the case to him as no one else could do. But I am sure you ought to be taking rest yourself.'

'My mother says she must do so at once,' said Dorothée, who had just returned, looking anxiously at Ursule. 'Sœur Monique is with the lady; and if she leaves her, I or one of my sisters will go in and watch.'

'I must not be long away,' said Ursule absently. But she made no further resistance when Dorothée put her arm in hers and drew her towards her room, and, indeed, her strength seemed to have all at once deserted her. She lay down on the only little bed left in the room, which had not been called into service below; and her kind companion, hoping that she would soon sleep, placed a dress of her own close to the bed, drew the white window-blind to exclude the light, and went softly out. It was very quiet and peaceful in the little room, far removed from the painful bustle below stairs. Nothing reached

Ursule's ear but the occasional sound of some of the farm animals and the monotonous hum of insects in the acacia tree outside the window. Yet she could not sleep. Her eye wandered backwards and forwards, from the homely scanty furniture to the gay little prints upon the walls, though afterwards she could not recollect their subjects in the least, so uncomprehending had been her gaze. She had not lain down for more than a quarter of an hour, when she longed to get up again ; the stillness and quiet, instead of soothing, seemed to oppress her. She even tried to rise, but her limbs ached so wearily that she gave way, and stretched herself again upon the bed with a sigh.

Nevertheless, although she was unable to sleep, by-and-bye the rest began to have a beneficial effect, the stupor-like feeling to pass off, and her ideas to detach themselves from that one fixed point round which they all revolved. She began to think not so much of the peril as of the escape—not so much of the sudden crash, and confusion, and horror, as of the Mercy which had protected her in the very jaws of death. Religion was to her such an impersonal thing, that what to others would have been an immediate and spontaneous thought came like a new sensation. She always believed that she ought to be 'good,' but it was the first time in all her life that a real glow of thankful childlike love went up from a full heart with the words of thankfulness she uttered. What would have become of Louis had she been killed? What would have become of herself? Ursule shuddered and hid her face in her hands, for there was the most dreadful thought. Like a lightning flash her life seemed to start out before her with all its shortcomings, its wasted hours, its carelessness, its impatience. What had she ever done to win her father back? Nothing. She had treated

him with angry contempt, which could but have the effect of making him more dislike his home. It was true that she was more angry for Louis' sake than her own ; but her newly stirred conscience asked itself whether a passionate love for Louis ought to swallow up her duty to her father, and there could be only one answer. How much had she done from a sense that it was right? how much because it was pleasant? How had she controlled her temper?—was it by this time in better keeping than a year or two ago? And now—if she had been cut off!

It was not the first time that such questions had arisen in her mind. They are merciful messengers, sent often to knock at the door of our hearts ; and alas for us if the time ever arrive when they come no more ! But Ursule had never honestly answered them. She had put them aside, or satisfied herself with some half-formed resolution ; and now, when for the first time in her life she began to see herself as she was, when there flashed before her the first real idea of what life really is, of what our enemy is, of what the struggle, and the battle, and the race must be—now even that faint picture must have overwhelmed her, if with it had not come the happy sense of grateful love, the thankfulness for a great deliverance, the belief that He, who in mercy had spared her, would forgive, and help, and strengthen.

The light faded away out of the little room, a fresh breeze sprang up, the white window-blind flapped backwards and forwards. Presently Dorothée came, a candle in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other.

‘Ah!’ she exclaimed, looking at Ursule with satisfaction, and then kissing her, ‘one can see by your face that you have had a good sleep.’

'I have not slept,' said Ursule, cheerfully; 'but I am quite rested. Only, do you know, you must be kind enough to pull me out of bed. My bones are so wonderfully stiff that I really don't think I can move in any other way.'

'But what! Who ever heard of such a thing! You are not to get up, I assure you. One of my sisters and I mean to take turns in sleeping on the floor; but we shall not disturb you. Louise has been obliged to go out, and make the women see after the poor beasts: the stupid creatures could do nothing but crowd round the door and stare, or go off to that terrible place. There, how foolish I am!' she said, seeing Ursule change colour. 'Jeanne told me to say nothing about it. Do not think of getting up. Madame is well cared for.'

But Ursule was so bent upon it that the good-natured Dorothée could hold out a very little time against her. She dressed her in a stout gown of her own, and insisted upon doing everything for her, the consequence of which was a loud 'Ah!' which made Ursule look up and ask, with a smile,

'What is it?'

'Your arm. It is black—it is dreadful to see!'

'It is only a bruise; it goes down my side. Think what it is to have escaped with no more than a bruise. How—how is that poor thing, the wife?'

'Jeanne said you were not to talk about it,' said Dorothée, doubtfully.

'Tell me,' said Ursule, coaxingly.

'She is broken-hearted. She does not cry, but sits and looks at him without a word. None of us like to go in, it is so terrible to see. There, now you are one of us. Shall I lend you my fête-day cap? The satin ribbons are quite new.'

Ursule declined the cap, in spite of this recommendation,



and the two girls went down together to Madame d'Aurigny's room first, where Sœur Monique, with her sweet, placid face, was sitting by Madame's side, talking in a low, soothing tone. The child was sleeping; a tiny lamp burned on the table; everything was in exquisite order. Dorothée stayed outside the door; at a sign from the Sister, Ursule went eagerly in.

'Ah, dear Madame!' she whispered, bending over her with tears in her eyes, 'are you better now?—in less pain?'

'Pain, child? If you had any perception, you would know that the pain is dreadful. You have been a long time in coming to inquire for me. Go away now. Sœur Monique interests me, and I do not wish for interruptions.'

Ursule drew back with a sigh. She said something in an under-tone to the Sister, who nodded her head after a moment's consideration.

'Go away, child,' repeated Madame, imperiously.

'Dear Madame, in one moment,' said the girl, gently. 'Do you know that a gentleman has come here to seek you from Dieppe?'

'A gentleman?—who then?'

Madame mentally ran over the names of those whom she once had known. Had any of them actually sought her out now?

'Quick, *dites donc*, who?'

'He says he is Mr. Blunt. He comes from England; he is your nephew.'

'My nephew—Félicité's son? Bah! it is impossible. Send him in at once, that I may see.'

Her voice was agitated, and Sœur Monique rose and bent over her.

'You must not excite yourself,' she said, in her calm, decided tone. 'It will be better for you not to see him until to-morrow.'

‘You are right,’ said Madame d’Aurigny, wearily putting her hand to her head. ‘Ursule would have understood it also, if she had any consideration.’

‘And you do not like me to stay,’ said Ursule, reluctantly preparing to leave her.

‘No, no, certainly; I wish for no one but Sœur Monique. You only fatigue me.’

The kind Sister saw the girl’s look of disappointment, and followed her to the door.

‘It is very common, this irritability,’ she said in a low voice; ‘you need not think she means what she says. After such a shock, the whole system is in a highly nervous condition, and we doctors are not surprised at anything that the patient fancies.’

‘I am not surprised,’ said Ursule, sadly; ‘because I know I often irritate her. Only——’ She did not conclude her sentence, for she could not say that she had been hoping now to grow more patient and forbearing.

‘Ah, to-morrow,’ said the Sister, cheerfully, nodding kindly as she returned to her charge.

‘To-morrow? What is that Sister Monique says about to-morrow?’ said the mistress of the farm, bustling up to them. ‘I am sure it is as much as one can do to provide for to-night. I do not know what to do about that poor young wife. Père Martin has been with her, and he left her, as he thought, comforted; but she is as bad as ever again now. I would stay with her if they did not want me in the kitchen. Dorothee, can you not go in? She ought not to be left alone, as she is.’

Dorothee shrunk back. She was as kind-hearted a girl as could be found, but quite unfitted for such a task as that of comforting the young widow.

'Well,' said her mother, compassionating her fears, 'I must get Jeanne.'

'May I try?' asked Ursule, timidly.

Mother and daughter cried out at the idea; but when she urged it intreatingly, it was really too welcome an offer to be refused. With a tremulous throbbing of her heart at the thought of the sorrow she was about to encounter, she followed the good woman to the door of the little room. It was ajar, and Madame Pichot was just going to push it open, when she held up her finger in token of silence. A man's voice was audible within, speaking very calmly and steadily.

'The saints preserve us,' said Madame. 'It is the young Englishman. Look!'

She held the door so that Ursule could look in. The wife had thrown herself upon the ground, by the bed on which her husband's body was laid, burying her head in her hands. Clement stood with his back to the door, from time to time gently saying a few sentences—not his own, but the beautiful words of eternal promise, which generation after generation have comforted the mourner's heart. And Madame, listening intently for some minutes, turned round to Ursule and whispered, her own eyes wet with tears, 'She will do now, the poor child! I can hear her crying.'

The women stole away, Ursule with a strong impression that Mr. Blunt must be 'very good,' but a second time disappointed in her hope to be of use. There was nothing now for it but obedience and a long night's rest in the little far-away room; and though hour after hour passed without sleep, it came at last in the early morning, and unquiet dreams of crashing trains melted away into unbroken and refreshing rest.

The next day, things resumed their more natural course. All

the sufferers, except three, were sufficiently recovered to be removed to their homes. The mother of the little girl came to fetch her ; and such a happy chattering broke forth in Madame d'Aurigny's room as Sœur Monique's authority was powerless to check. Ursule and the girl stood upon tiptoe, and peeped in at the door to see the pretty meeting—the child's burst of delight, and the mother's grateful look of intense relief. Even Madame d'Aurigny grew interested, and wished them a gracious good-bye ; and quite a little triumphal procession escorted the doctor across the yard when he carried the little girl himself and placed her in the carriage.

'*Bon jour*,'—'*Bon jour*,'—'*Au revoir* !'—'A thousand thanks !' were called out while the carriage continued within hearing distance, and then handkerchiefs were waved until long after it had gone out of sight.

'I declare,' cried Louise Pichot, twirling herself round, 'this affair has marvellously enlivened us, after all.'

'Louise, Louise !'

'Well, Jeanne,' she said, penitently, 'I know it was very dreadful. But you must own it is good to see such happiness as that ; and it is good to have Ursule.'

'It cannot be good to rejoice over anything that brings so much sadness,' said Jeanne, resolutely.

Louise looked unconvinced.

'Do you not think, Mademoiselle Jeanne,' said Clement, joining in the conversation, 'that the deeper our sympathy, the more readily it will answer to any call made upon it ? I mean,' he continued, perceiving that he was not quite understood, 'that your sister would have been as much wanting in kindness if she had refused to be glad over that mother's delight just now, as if she had felt no sorrow for the poor thing in yonder.'

The grave Jeanne shook her head. 'I should not care for people's sorrow for me, if they forgot it directly,' she said.

'And I would much rather they did as Monsieur says,' exclaimed Louise, who seldom ventured to contradict her sister, but now tasted the delight of having a champion.

'I think that must be the best, because it is the hardest,' put in Ursule, in a low voice—'the hardest to practise always, I mean. Sometimes one feels more quickly with people in sorrow, and sometimes with those in joy; but it must be very difficult always to throw oneself into their case.'

'Sœur Monique does that,' said Dorothée, pausing in her knitting. 'Did you see how pleased and happy she looked when the little thing flung her arms round her neck? And yet no one can feel more in trouble than she does.'

'Louisette,' interrupted Jeanne, 'what will our father say if the milk-cheeses are not ready for to-morrow's market? Come, we must go into the dairy.'

'And I must go back to the house,' said Dorothée. 'Stay out a little longer, Ursule; the orchard is pleasant at this time of day—the air will do you good.'

If Ursule expected Mr. Blunt to follow the three sisters into the sunny-looking old farm, framed in timber, like so many of the Normandy houses, she was mistaken. He turned with her towards the orchard, and was the first to speak.

'Madame d'Aurigny is really better, you think?'

'Oh, I hope so,' she said, brightly; 'I believe she is recovering from the shock. It has been such a wonderful escape! Do you know,' she continued, in a changed, awe-struck voice, 'that our compartment was really crushed to atoms?'

'Did you feel anything of what was coming? But perhaps I ought not to ask you, or let you dwell upon it.'

‘Everybody says that,’ said she, with a touch of impatience; ‘and, after all, it is worse to keep it to oneself always. No; I don’t think I had time to feel more than just an instantaneous impression of something being wrong. I don’t remember anything whatever before I found myself lying on a bank, wondering how I came there, and what was going on all round me. The horror was when I looked up and could see nothing of Madame.’

‘The marvel with such an accident is that so little mischief was done. I went this morning, very early, to examine into it a little more closely.’

‘Ah?’

She looked at him with eager eyes of inquiry.

‘Oh, the line is passable now, and the rails mended. But it will take some time to clear away the remains. When do you think my aunt will be ready to move?’

‘Not for a day or two,’ she said, quickly; ‘certainly not.’

Mr. Blunt looked at her with some surprise. He thought she would have been anxious to return to Louis; and his hard thoughts of her carelessness for him returned. ‘Your brother will be very much disappointed,’ he said, coldly.

Her eyes filled with tears, but she kept her face determinedly turned away that he might not see them, quick enough to read his impression, and too proud to exculpate herself, by saying what was indeed the truth—that as yet she could scarcely endure the thought of another journey.

‘How did you think Louis was, Monsieur?’ she asked at last, with some difficulty.

‘Very weak, certainly.’

‘Did Madame Sanson think him more weak than usual?’ she said, anxiously.

'She did not exactly say so.' Clement's fixed idea was making him very pitiless.

'Oh, Monsieur!' Ursule hesitated, stopped, and finally walked on again in the long soft grass. 'Do you remain here long?' she said, abandoning her first intention.

'Only long enough to see my aunt home again. Do you think I could persuade her to go to England? My mother wants to have her there. You shake your head: you do not believe she would consent?'

'It is such a journey!'

'Well, we shall see; I shall not give up easily.'

Shyly glancing at Mr. Blunt, she thought it probable that anything on which he set his mind would be carried out. She was sorry he had taken a prejudice against her, because she was inclined to be grateful for his kindness to Louis; but while at any former time she might have resented it, the events of the last twenty-four hours had softened and humbled her; and she only smiled to herself with a glad security in the mutual love which could be so misread.

Still it gave her an uncomfortable feeling in her companionship, and she was not long in making an excuse for returning to the farm, through the untidy yard, where a great strongly-built Normandy horse was being saddled to convey brisk dapper little Monsieur Pichot to the house of a newly-married son, who lived some kilomètres away.

The girls in the dairy called to her to come and help them; and after she had ascertained that Madame d'Aurigny wanted nothing, she joined Jeanne and Louise in their pleasant occupation of pressing the rich thickened cream into moulds, to be left to turn sour and then ripen.

All that day and the next Madame d'Aurigny was imperative

in her desire to have her nephew with her whenever she was able to bear any person in the room, while Ursule's attendance she as imperatively declined. There was the charm of novelty about Clement; he was not to be had any day; it was not unnatural that she should cling to his presence. She lavished kind words upon him, and made him sit where she could watch every movement. She was jealous of Ursule's so much as being in the room; and the girl bore her fancies with a patience and gentleness quite new to her. But Clement, seeing only the outside, concluded that she avoided the sick-room from selfish motives: he pitied from his heart his poor desolate aunt, who grasped so eagerly at his affection that he could not believe she would set aside any within her reach. He determined that Ursule only sought her own pleasure—that she had left Louis selfishly, for the sake of this expedition, and that she now avoided her kind protectress in order to amuse herself with the girls of the farm.

It was a harsh judgment; but which of us has not suffered for our harsh judgments?

Three days passed—four days. Ursule wrote to Louis daily, long letters full of love, and bright with descriptions of all that went on at the farm—the butter-making and the bread-making, and Blanchette the calf, that knew her and came to eat out of her hand—the fresh pastoral life, so new to her—the dewy mornings, the calm evenings, the kindly people—concluding every account with, 'If only you were here!' Clement would have melted towards her, had he seen those letters. Madame d'Aurigny to all appearances grew better. She sat up in her bed, moved to a chair, and, by-and-bye, came into the kitchen. At times, it is true, she was especially nervous and irritable, and she complained, not infrequently, of her back; but she had set



her heart upon returning to Dieppe at the end of a week, and when the time came there was nothing, apparently, to prevent her. She was the last of the sufferers, and, as Louise said, they would feel quite desolate without any one to nurse.

‘Dear Ursule,’ said Dorothée, sadly, when they were all waiting at the door for the light covered cart which was to take them to the station, two miles off, ‘do not forget us.’

The girl’s answer was a kiss.

‘You tremble so—are you ill?’

‘And she looks like a sheet,’ put in Louise; ‘worse than when she came!’

‘It is nothing,’ said Ursule, determined to conceal her fears. ‘Come to see us some day.’

‘Ursule!’ called Madame d’Aurigny; and, hurrying through her leave-taking, she ran out and seated herself in the cart behind Clement and Monsieur Pichot, who had insisted upon driving them to the station himself.





## CHAPTER IX.

REST.

Who is the angel that cometh ?

Death'

ADELAIDE PROCTOR.

**A**ND 'I tell thee, man of half an idea,' said Madame Sanson, sharply, 'that our Ursule is not what she was. Famished! as if an hour's journey would famish them! When I went to the station, and saw her white face looking out of the carriage, I could have cried. Madame is not so bad to see, considering what she has gone through; but Ursule!'

Madame need not have been so much alarmed, for it was rather suppressed terror at finding herself again in a railway train than any more serious ailment which affected the girl. It required all the self-command she could muster to keep herself from screaming many times on the journey, and, by the time they reached the station, she was sitting motionless and rigid, a very different person, as Clement remarked to himself, than when she was among her bright companions of the farm. Nobody knew what she suffered, as she did not complain; and when Madame Sanson petted and pitied her with a warm

motherly welcome, and she scarcely answered, he made up his mind more strongly than ever that she was selfish and spoilt, and vexed to return to her quiet home.

The meeting between the brother and sister he did not see. He and Madame Sanson helped his aunt up the old staircase, while Ursule came slowly behind, and passed on to the higher story. Louis was watching for her, and, with a cry of delight, she ran to his side, threw her arms round him, and burst into tears. She had not given way before; but now it seemed as if the terror and excitement must find a vent, and, struggle as she might, she could not regain her self-command. By-and-bye, however, Louis' caressing touch, as he smoothed her hair, began to exercise its old power, her sobs grew less frequent, her trembling ceased, and at last she looked into his face with a smile. Something she saw there made her start.

'Louis, have you been worse?'

'Do you suppose dreaming over railway accidents to be a wholesome proceeding?' said he playfully.

'Oh, I cannot bear to think of what you must have gone through. Surely you are thinner? Have you had all you wanted?'

'All, and a great deal more. I began to have fears that, if you did not soon come home, Madame would tie me up in cotton wool to preserve me. Her kindness has been wonderful; Monsieur's, too. Think of his coming up here, the other day, and bringing me an offering of cider.'

'Cider!'

'You need not be alarmed. I had great work to reach that drawer, but there you will find the bottle safely deposited. One had not the heart to tell him that cider was not exactly invalid's drink.'

Ursule was looking attentively at her brother. There was a change in his face ; it was more transparent, more spiritual-looking, in spite of the flush which the delight of her return had called up. But no shadow of the truth crossed her mind ; she thought only that he had suffered from anxiety, and would need tender care. Even when, later in the day, he mentioned casually Mr. Blunt's kindness in bringing M. Pelletier to see him, she did not take alarm. It was perfectly natural to her that every one who saw Louis should be interested in him ; equally natural that those who did not know his complaint should believe in a doctor's power to do good. She felt exceedingly grateful to Mr. Blunt, but not in the least conscious that Louis was more ill than usual.

It was a delightful relief to her to sit in her old place by his side, and to pour out all the experiences of the past few days, chattering freely and unreservedly about whatever came uppermost. Always accustomed to share her thoughts with him, she told him what she felt the evening after the accident, as she lay in Dorothée's little white bed. Louis listened thankfully. It seemed as if the deliverance had opened her heart, and by that means reached her reason and her will. What she said was very simple, but it showed a juster, because a deeper, conception of her own faults than she had ever before displayed, while her perfectly truthful nature guarded her against the least exaggeration of expression. It became a grave, eager talk at last—she listening with admiring love to Louis' remarks, full of the beauty of holiness, and he speaking more freely on the subject closest to his heart than he had ever done in the days when love for him made her chief, almost her only reason for caring to listen. Yet he longed, more than ever, that some one else could be found to help his sister ; he felt his own incapacity strongly. He did

not know that for years he had, indeed, been rendering her the best help in the example of his life—an example which had long been secretly working, and would produce its fruit in God's good time.

When Clement came up-stairs and interrupted the conversation, Ursule slipped out of the room and ran down to Madame d'Aurigny. She found her irritably contrasting her apartment with that which she had enjoyed at Rouen; she was certain that it had been grossly neglected during her absence, and threatened Ursule with a withdrawal of herself altogether from the house.

'That my nephew should see me here!' was the general tenor of her complaint; and it was not easy to meet it. Ursule bore, with very tolerable patience, a great deal of provocation; but she began to wonder whether this access of irritability had anything to do with the accident, and to wish that, while she had the opportunity, she had asked Sœur Monique a few more questions. Mr. Blunt's presence invariably calmed her; but when he was not in the room she gave way to excited reproaches and lamentations.

And Clement himself felt that, in a day or two at latest, he must return to his mother. He was heartily sorry to leave his aunt in her dreary solitariness, and he tried with every persuasion in his power to induce her to promise to come to England. She listened and longed, but shook her head: the strange country, the journey, the change in her habits, were too formidable obstacles to be at once surmounted. Still she thought she would go some day; she even hesitated as to fixing a date for it, and Clement at times almost believed he had succeeded in his persuasions, when some fresh motive for irresolution presented itself. He spoke to Madame Sanson about the possibility of giving his aunt some extra comforts, and found her unconscious that any-

thing was needed: had she not Ursule?—an argument which did not greatly impress him.

‘Surely, Madame, a girl might be hired to come daily and do all that is needed for her room.’

‘Monsieur is an admirable young man; but no one could do that better for Madame than Ursule. Those girls, I know them! Ah-h-h!’

Nor in speaking to his aunt did he find much more satisfaction. She was proud, and unwilling that he should suppose her not duly waited upon. She assured him that, without the necessary work for her, Madame Sanson’s days would be passed in absolute idleness; and, in truth, Madame d’Aurigny would have been sorry to exchange Ursule, with all her varying moods, for the most promising *fille* in Dieppe, who was no better than a servant, and could but have supplied a servant’s place. Clement could do no more than procure one or two small articles of furniture of which he saw she was chiefly in need, and press her directly she felt equal to the move to join his mother in England, engaging at any time to come and fetch her himself.

At those times when he went to sit with Louis, Ursule always left the room. Her doing so was partly owing to Madame’s speech to her about Pierre Renait, and partly from the feeling that Mr. Blunt judged her severely, not unjustly; for she was too single-minded to blame and yet excuse herself. When she acknowledged that her life had been self-pleasing and self-willed, she did not try to soften away the judgment; she set it honestly before her eyes, and determined, with God’s grace, to strive against its so continuing. As yet she scarcely realized the difficulties that would beset her. An escape such as hers had been was likely to impress the most thoughtless. It had brought death before her in its most sudden and awful form; the effect

must continue for some time, and gratitude seemed to make all her efforts easy. She wanted some one to warn her that this exaltation of feeling, this vivid appreciation of mercy, would pass away, and that she would need all the strength she could obtain to lead her onwards through the path of little, wearisome duties, of daily self-sacrificing efforts, of failures, of falls, of despondency. But she would as soon have thought of applying to the Maire as to the pastor of the little French congregation for help. He was a good, kindly man, unaccustomed to private ministrations or more personal influence with the members of his flock than he gained by his *prêche* in the 'Temple.' The very idea never crossed her mind, although Louis, less well acquainted with M. Laroche, had several times reflected on its possibility.

Ursule, as I have said, generally left the room when Mr. Blunt paid his daily visits to her brother; but, on what she knew would be his last, Louis had beforehand asked her so imploringly to remain that she could not refuse. She withdrew, however, to the window, and sat there upon a low stool, gazing into the street, as if she had found something exceedingly interesting, and taking no part in the conversation.

She heard it, nevertheless, and she listened with a good deal of attention. Clement's manner was never so kind and gentle as with the sick boy; but she remarked that he did not so much as allude to the possibility of his becoming stronger, and a pang went through her, when this struck her, as if some unacknowledged haunting fear had suddenly taken form. He spoke of his own return, of the chance of Madame d'Aurigny's resolving to go to England; and when Louis only answered with his quiet smile, Clement said,

'Meanwhile, I want a remembrance.'

‘Anything that we have, Monsieur,’ said the boy, eagerly; ‘but that is so little.’

He drew out the little cherry-girl, and looked at her regretfully. If it had been more advanced, here was the very thing; but, alas! his dreams of fortune had not been fulfilled; he rarely now had strength to use the brushes; the design was scarcely sketched.

‘No,’ said Clement, kindly; ‘you will like to try to finish that. But what about your father’s pictures? Is their price beyond my reach?’

‘Oh, I wish——’ began Louis. Then he stopped, confused, not daring to bestow one upon Clement, as he would have rejoiced to do. ‘Which of them do you like best?’ he asked.

‘That sea-piece, with the storm gathering. It haunts me. It is the most suggestive picture I have ever seen.’

‘Ursule, can you bring it here?’

She rose at once. It was so favourite a picture of her own that she scarcely liked to part with it; but since Clement had been kind to Louis, he was welcome to anything. The price was affixed to it, and was sufficiently moderate for the young Englishman to indulge what at the same time he considered to be an act of charity. As Ursule stood there holding it in a good light, her eye sought Louis’ face. The fear which had suddenly shaped itself in her heart gave her an expression of intense yearning love startling to Clement when he caught it; it was something so much deeper than he had credited her with. He began to think he had misjudged her, and to form a half-wish that he had more opportunities left of proving whether or no this was the case. But it was now too late. He bought the picture, wished Louis good-bye with an Englishman’s horror of anything approaching to a display of emotion,



and was a little vexed at Ursule's reserved bow ; running downstairs to spend his last moments with his aunt, and to be accompanied on his departure from the house by a whole volley of affectionate farewells from Madame, and a grunt from Monsieur, which, as his mouth was full of green peas, was the greatest effort of which he was capable, and possessed at least the merit of ambiguity.

The house seemed rather cheerless without him, it must be confessed. The events of the last few weeks had made a break in the quiet lives of its occupants, and Clement's departure left them in their old position, yet with a difference. Madame d'Aurigny bewailed herself as the one most to be pitied ; but Louis also had lost a great deal in losing him, the only person who knew his secret, and could talk quietly on the subject ; while to Ursule a change had come over her life, but with it a fear which would not be put aside.

As the days went on, Madame d'Aurigny claimed her attention more and more. She could scarcely endure to spend so much time with her as obliged her to leave Louis for hours in the day ; yet she had found out that nothing distressed him so much as for her to refuse to sit with Madame when she desired it. Nor did he appear actually worse. She persuaded herself that it was the excessive heat that came on at this time which made him weaker ; when cool weather returned again, he would regain his lost strength. She persuaded herself, and yet watched so anxiously that she grew half angry with herself, and kept her anxiety from Louis as carefully as if to hint at it would be to confirm it. Meanwhile, beyond a doubt, the accident had affected Madame more than was at first suspected : she could not go out, complained of constant pain in her back, and was a hundred times more irritable than ever she had been before.

If poor M. Sanson had heard half the complaints she uttered against his imaginary stews, even his appetite must have suffered. Madame Sanson used to descend from one of her interviews with her lodger, and exclaim, holding up her hands,

‘She is getting beyond everything—that woman! One would suppose that she was mistress, and I the dirt under her feet. This must not be, and that must not be. It is as difficult to coax her into good humour as to light a stove with wet sticks. Well, after all, it is worse for her than for me; and for the rest, what will you have?—the wind that blows from the north is cold, and always will be.’

Madame’s conversations with her husband were of a one-sided nature, for he rarely did more than nod his large head or give an additional whiff to his pipe by way of answer, she meanwhile attaching to each manœuvre the meaning that pleased her, and replying to it as if it contained a suggestion.

‘Ursule—did you ask? To say the truth, my heart aches for the poor child, and I feel quite sad about her. I can’t help believing that she, too, is becoming an angel. She used to have her little furies and her naughtinesses, but now, if she is out with anything of the sort, she looks ready to cry or to bite off her tongue! I hardly know her; I cannot think she is the same.’

What Madame thought of Louis, Ursule could not understand. She said very little about him, but her motherly attentions were redoubled; and when Madame d’Aurigny refused any society but the girl’s, Madame used to toil up to the top of the house and coax Louis to eat, or gossip to him about Pierre Renait’s approaching marriage and the wonderful *corbeille* of his bride.

Time passed. One day Madame d’Aurigny called Ursule to return as she was leaving the room.

'By-the-bye,' said she, 'I have had another letter from my nephew to-day, in which he repeats a question of my sister's, to which I attached so little importance that it escaped my memory. Félicité was always a little strange; when once she had made up her mind, nothing would turn her. I remember when we were children together—well, the years go on, and it is some little time ago now—there was to be a great Pardon held, not so many kilomètres away from where we lived. My father and mother were going, as was the custom, and Félicité was wild to go also; but my mother would not hear of it. She said we children were better at home, and she should be frightened to death if she fancied us crushed in the crowd round the bonfire, and very likely getting scalded with the water out of the big cauldron; for the children always would press in to throw their bits of stick. They would have taken us to see the saint in her beautiful bridal dress, and sent us home afterwards with the *bonne*, and that was all I cared about; but Félicité said that was nothing, and she would not go, so I had to stay at home as well.

'She looked so determined all the day, after my father and mother and my father's sister had started, with old Jean riding behind them, carrying a great bundle of flax for the saint, that I could not tell what she was thinking about, and she never liked me to ask her questions. We went to bed earlier than usual, by her wish, and I fell asleep, and slept as one slept in those days—all through the night; so figure to yourself my astonishment when, the next morning, I looked round to say something to Félicité, and found she was not there! Our *bonne*, Toinette, was more frightened than I was when she came in, and when they had hunted everywhere and could not find her. For my part, I had a strong idea where she had gone; but I dared

not breathe a word of it, for I knew that *Félicité* would beat me when she came back, if she thought I had told anything.

‘Nobody knew what to do. *Toinette* was afraid of sending after my father and mother, lest they should blame her for want of diligence. As for me, I went about singing, because I was sure I should hear all about the Pardon and the bonfire, and then they scolded me for not caring about *Félicité*. Quite late that night, she was brought home by a young *Kloer*—a singing clerk—and hard work he had to carry her. She fought, and scratched, and pulled his long hair with all her might, directly she found out where he was taking her. But fancy her boldness! Little thing as she was, she had got out of the window directly she knew I was asleep, and went along the road by herself when it was nearly dark, and I should have expected at every step to meet the *Buguel Nos*, till she came to the plain and the bonfire, and there she played about with the other children, and at last crept under a tent, where were a number of people and children, and fell asleep. But she did not care about the next day at all; she said there was too much preaching, and they sang nothing but prayers. Still, it must have been pretty to see all the processions coming in, with their flags and their offerings, and falling down on their knees. There were so many families mixed up with one another, that *Félicité* got plenty to eat; but, at last, some good woman thought there was something wrong, and she persuaded the young *Kloer* to find out from her where she lived, and to pretend to take her to another part of the plain. Oh, how angry she was! She had wanted to see the fair the next day, and instead of that *Toinette* kept her in bed the whole time until my father and mother came home.’

‘And that was *Madame Blunt*!’ said *Ursule*, aghast.

‘Yes,’ said Madame, smiling to herself at the remembrance, and softened by the crowd of old memories which were thronging after it. ‘That was Félicité exactly. You have never seen a Pardon, child? Besides, from what I hear, it is all altered now, and not worth attending.’

‘My mother was a Breton,’ answered Ursule, ‘and often told me of them, and the sailors trooping up from the shore.’

‘Ah! your mother! That was what Félicité desired to know. Where does your family come from, and your name—your name of Ursule?’

‘It was my grandmother’s,’ said the girl, with a little wonder—‘Ursule Laget she was called. She lived at Nantes.’

‘Ursule Laget, of Nantes! And your mother was——’

‘Marie.’

‘Child, are you sure?’

‘But yes, Madame! It would be hard if one did not know so much.’ She looked with some astonishment at Madame, who was strangely excited, but said nothing, beyond repeating to herself over and over again in a whisper, ‘The child of the Lagets, at Nantes!’ Presently she said, ‘You may go now, child; I must write,’ and then did what she had never done before in all her life—drew the girl down and kissed her forehead. Ursule ran up-stairs, full of wonder, to repeat the strange event to Louis, and to relate in full the history of this naughty Félicité, who was mother to no less a personage than Mr. Blunt.

It was one of those days when Louis was unusually well, sat up for a longer time, planned designs for his painting, and liked Ursule to chatter of all that passed through her head. But on the following morning he was worse than she had ever seen him—breathless, speechless, and unable to move from his bed. She called Madame in an agony of terror, and when she

saw her only shake her head and look distressed, with a gesture of dumb despair, she ran down the stairs and out into the street to fetch M. Pelletier. He came, saw Louis, prescribed for him, and tried to leave the house without speaking to Ursule. He need not have been afraid ; she dared not ask him any questions, or face her fears. Only she would not leave her brother. When Madame Sanson climbed the stairs to deliver Madamed'Aurigny's imperative message for her to descend, Ursule shook her head, and Madame went slowly down again, unable to press the request.

'The heat is trying you, dear,' said Ursule, for the twentieth time : 'you will be better when the evening comes.'

She got up quickly, and crossed the room. Louis' eyes were fastened upon her with so peculiar an expression that she could not meet them.

'My darling,' his voice was very low and calm, 'would it not be better to face it?'

'Face it—what?' She turned sharply round with a ring of anguish in her voice.

'The knowledge you are trying to shut out.'

'I do not understand,' said Ursule, trembling.

'Do you not? Do you not really know that we shall not be together much longer?'

She cried out passionately, 'No, no !' then meeting his eyes, flung herself down by the side of his couch, and buried her face in her hands. 'M. Pelletier's medicine will do you good,' she murmured.

'No medicine will do me good, dear. M. Pelletier knows that as well as I do. I have tried to spare you by not telling you before, but it might have been better to have concealed nothing.'

His old trick of smoothing her hair was quieting her even now ; but his exceeding weakness made speech difficult. 'Why should we not talk it over like any other change?' he said. 'There is nothing really terrible.'

'For you——' she said, in a choked voice.

'Nor for you. Darling, it is but for a little while.'

She shook her head. That little while seemed to her to stretch through such a long vista of years !

Nevertheless, Louis believed that, when the first force of the shock was past, there was comfort in the perfect confidence of old days, which she had shrunk from inviting while she was haunted by an unacknowledged fear. He tried to prevent her from shutting out any longer the thought of his death, and to accustom her to speak of it calmly. Whatever moments of dread came over his own spirit—and who can descend into the shadows of that awful valley, and not be oppressed with some fearfulness at its unknown depths?—he hid from Ursule, speaking to her only of those brighter times of comfort when hope seemed almost to have attained its fruition.

Meanwhile Madame d'Aurigny, really suffering herself, was feeling exceedingly injured at Ursule's desertion. All that Madame Sanson could say was in vain ; and one day when the girl ran down for a moment at the express desire of her old friend, she overwhelmed her with a torrent of bitter reproaches.

'Louis is very ill,' said Ursule, with tears in her eyes, unheeding the reproaches.

'That is an absurdity.'

'Absurdity, Madame!'

'You and he make so much of his illness.'

'How dare you say so !' cried the girl, indignantly, 'how dare you say so ! He who gives up everything—he who thinks

of you when you never think of him—he make much of his suffering!’

If words and looks could wither up, Madame must have shrunk to nothing. Ursule would have said more, but by a great effort restrained herself, and hurried out of the room. Madame felt at last that she had gone too far. Ursule had been so much more gentle of late that she had taken advantage of the change, and tyrannised over her as she would not have done in past days. But this insinuation against Louis had been too much. Madame d'Aurigny began to wonder whether he were indeed seriously ill; she scarcely ever so much as asked for him; she was almost angry when Ursule alluded to his suffering, feeling it a grievance that any one besides herself in the house should meet with sympathy. Now she was a little ashamed of herself, and a good deal alarmed lest she should have altogether offended Ursule. However, in the evening the girl came down, very subdued and sad, but no longer angry. It was, of course, Louis who had persuaded her to do so, all his old dread of anything approaching to strife quickened and increased by his present condition; and it was to satisfy him that his sister agreed to deprive herself of those moments which were doubly precious now.

For each day the change was but to more utter weakness. Power after power seemed to ebb away, while the inward light brightened. It grieved him so evidently to see Ursule shrink from speaking of what must come, that for his sake she nerved herself to talk calmly on the subject; and it was almost a surprise to her at first that, thinking of and caring for her as he did, there should be so little anxiety about her future in what he said, until she realised that the calm peacefulness—more than submission—of his spirit did not permit him so



much as to doubt that all was and would be well. That trustfulness, like a little child's, was the best lesson that her less chastened heart could have received.

Louis had a longing to see his father again, but no one knew where to send to find him. It was many weeks since he had been at home; and his last letter, written from Bruges, spoke of his going on through the old Belgian towns to seek subjects for his pencil. Madame, who had regal notions on the subject of the Post Office, and believed that to post a letter was to make sure that it would be received, somehow or other, wrote one to Bruges, although it was tolerably certain that he had long ago left the town. No answer came—indeed, Ursule had not dared to expect one; but she felt their desolate position more bitterly than ever.

Yet it was not until Louis himself suggested it that she asked the French pastor to see him, nor until his visit was over, and Louis lay with a look of gladness on his face, that she realised the joy to him of the promise of the morrow. The morrow came, and with it intense weakness; but he would not hear of putting off, and, indeed, after her first word, she dared not press it. And while for herself she never forgot the comfort of that morning, to him it seemed to have brought not only strength of soul, but a partial return of bodily powers. He spoke less feebly, and smiled like his old self when one of Monsieur Sanson's characteristic messages was given him.

'Good Monsieur and Madame! They will always be kind to you, Ursule.'

'Always, dear.'

'I should like to see him again. Ask him to come up to-morrow.'

But Monsieur Sanson was never asked. That night brought

a change, and stupor and wandering came on. They could not be sure whether at times some slight consciousness did not return, but, if so, it was confused and clouded. The sinking was gradual and painless, like that which often accompanies extreme old age. Ursule, tearless, stood by, feeling and enduring the utter helplessness which comes over the bystanders at sight of that dread, irresistible approach, and too much absorbed in him to have thought for her own part in the separation. Nay, she had strength at intervals to repeat, with an unfaltering voice, the words she had heard the pastor use the day before, and had marked in her Bible. Madame sobbed loudly; Ursule only watched Louis—watched till there stole over his face that awful shadow which comes but once—watched till over the shadow there fell also a stillness, and, without a sign or word, she knew that the life in which her own seemed to be bound up had passed away beyond her reach.





## CHAPTER X.

‘ADIEU DONC, BELLE FRANCE.’

But think nae ye my heart was sair,  
When I laid the mould on his yellow hair?  
Think nae ye my heart was wae,  
When I turn'd about, away to gae?

*Lament of the Border Widow.*



THE following day was too full of sharp anguish to be called unreal, and yet Ursule often felt as if she was living in a dream. Paroxysms of violent sorrow were succeeded by hours in which the sorrow was only not violent, because it was stupefied. That which soothed her most effectually was the sight of his face, on which the look of everlasting peace was stamped; and while this was left to her she did not feel utterly lonely. It was on the afternoon of the funeral that Madame feared most for her. She had attended it with a quietness that was unnatural, had seen the coffin descend, heard the pastor's voice proclaim the end of the earthly life, and had walked home, tearless still, and rigid; but when she stood in the midst of their little room, and saw his empty couch, the self-control gave way, and she burst into a passion of tears, more heart-rending than any she had yet gone

through. It lasted long enough really to frighten Madame, who, looking round for consolation, caught up Louis' little brown Bible and pushed it into her hands. It seemed to Ursule like a treasure sent from him ; she pressed it to her heart, and kissed it vehemently, and afterwards she consented to let Madame undress and lay her, exhausted as she was, upon her bed. The sun streamed in at the open window, and with it came a remembrance of almost the last verse she had read to him, where among the glories of the Heavenly Home it was told how the City had no need of the sun ; 'for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof.' Then, as she opened the Bible, her eye fell, verse after verse, upon his favourite words ; and they, too, crept into her heart and comforted it. Directly she could, in any degree, let her mind stretch itself to take in the faintest realization of what was now his joy, the healing process was begun.

But she was so very young that both life and sorrow seemed endless.

Perhaps the companionship of Madame d'Aurigny, when she nerved herself to go down, was better for her than Madame Sanson's motherly pity and petting. Madame was a little touched at first at sight of her white sad face ; but no impression that was not connected with herself could last long, and she soon fell into her old sharp ways. Ursule for some time was too apathetic to heed them—like a person stunned by a severe shock, by whom all lesser touches are unfelt ; more than once she found herself wondering over the idea that such petty annoyances could have ever affected her.

Yet, with it all, the blow was not so crushing as it would have been a month or two earlier. She had tasted something of the Infinite Love, had learned a lesson of trust, had seen the

blessing of the peace of God. Often she thanked Him that Louis had insisted upon her facing the prospect of separation, and that thus they had been able to talk openly of what lay at their hearts. Because at the end there had been no time for it—no last messages, no tender words; and there might have been a dreadful blank in her remembrances, instead of the treasured sentences now always to be kept there. They came back one by one, and it was the recalling something he had said which first startled her with the thought that her grief was selfish in its absorption, and that she had no right to tell herself that she was left alone and forlorn in the struggle of life.

That thought led on to the conviction that the little wearisome duties from which she shrank as yet were the very work which was given her to do, and she made up her mind to set them aside no longer. Their small stock of money would have been exhausted, had not one of her father's pictures been sold to a dealer just at the time when Louis was at his worst; but Ursule did not know how Madame Sanson had worked for it, and gone about among all her friends until she achieved her object. She did know enough, however, to make her feel that nothing she could do could sufficiently repay the care and kindness Madame had lavished on the sick boy, and she hoped to show her gratitude in the little ways which alone were possible to her. There was no such debt owing to Madame d'Aurigny; but here she was bound by Louis' wishes, and even if he had not besought her to be kind and gentle, there was the humbling remembrance of how often she had grieved him with her loss of temper and impatience towards Madame to keep her on her guard against such failures now.

But the task was far harder than it might have been in past days. Madame's complaints of her back grew worse, and her

helplessness and irritation increased also. No patience could win gratitude ; no sympathy satisfied. The only person, absent or present, whom she absolved from blame was her nephew. The only thing in her life which seemed to give her pleasure was a letter from him. One morning Ursule found her, having received one, reading it for the second time.

‘So you are come at last!’ It was her invariable greeting.

‘Have you wanted anything, Madame?’

‘Your usual foolish question! Yes, I have wanted a great many things ; but I have learned never to expect so much as common attention. Times are changed, indeed, since I was young.’

‘What can I do?’ said Ursule, patiently.

‘Nothing. That is just of what I complain. I lie awake in the night, and think whether anything in this house can give me pleasure—distraction from all I have to endure—and I answer myself, No. You can do nothing. It is very hard that I cannot be as other people are—that I should be alone, without relations or friends such as I ought to have. And, as if that was not bad enough, now when, for the sake of the advantages I expected you to derive, I forced myself to undertake that unfortunate journey, I am rewarded by the frightful accident which is carrying me to my grave. Oh, it is, in spite of what you say! You would believe it if you had any feeling ; but no one understands me, except my nephew.’

Ursule did not know what to answer. She asked whether Mr. Blunt was coming back again.

‘Do you suppose that persons in his position can employ their time as they will? My nephew has sufficient good feeling to do all that I could desire ; but there are exigencies which cannot be forgotten. Also, there is his mother. No,’ continued

Madame, dreamily, 'he cannot come, but Félicité greatly desires that I should join her and him.'

'In England, Madame?'

'Where else? If it were not for the voyage, the journey ;— but no, it is impossible. I could not undertake it ; although Félicité is so determined when once she has set her heart upon a thing, that there is no contradicting her. You were to go, too, child.'

'I?'

'Yes ; she desires it.'

Ursule smiled a little scornfully at the idea of this unknown strong-willed Madame Blunt influencing her movements ; but the smile died away in wonder that she should have been mentioned or wished for. She could not resist asking,

'And why, Madame?'

'That I am not to tell you. If I go, you go ; that is all I know.'

Such a disposal of herself was irritating, and the girl had much ado to keep back a sarcastic answer, instead of the words,

'The house will be very strange without you, Madame, if you should decide upon the journey.'

'I have already told you that you will be with me,' Madame said, angrily.

'And my father? Is he to find both of us gone?' said Ursule, in a low voice.

'He has never done himself any good, and he will never do you any good,' answered Madame, with decision. 'I hate selfishness myself, and I know that all men are selfish, except perhaps Clement ; but, of selfish men, your father exceeds all. You will not think of him, I hope?'

‘Well,’ said Ursule, ‘after all, my going is not the question. You are not going yourself, Madame.’

And the thought scarcely crossed her mind again, except as a cause of wonder that Clement Blunt’s mother should desire to see her.

Madame d’Aurigny, however, continually harped upon the one string. It was curious to see how, even in the distance, Félicité’s more powerful will influenced her less decided sister. Evidently, in the old days her wishes had been imperative ; and now a letter dictated by her, and written by Clement—who could not venture to soften his mother’s words, since she insisted always upon reading the letter before it was sent—was sufficient to set Madame in a fidget of anxiety as to the possibility of obeying what sounded very like a command. Her own weakness, instead of diminishing, increased ; she had not even been out since her return to the old house, and no one could have been more unfit for the journey. Madame Sanson cried out in horror at the very thought of her undertaking it. Yet ‘Félicité desires it’ seemed to have an influence which, in spite of the many years it had slumbered, was almost more powerful than all the reasons common prudence could advance.

‘Ursule,’ said Madame Sanson, one evening, when the two women, old and young, were sitting together in the little glazed room, Madame with her feet upon a *chauffe-pied*, for the autumnal evenings were becoming a little chilly, ‘who do you think has been to see me to-day?’

‘How can I guess?’

‘Well, not so very long ago, you might have guessed quickly enough. But now I admit he is a stranger.’

Ursule did not answer ; but the tears sprang into her eyes. Pierre Rénait was inseparably bound up with the days which



appeared to be parted from her by a great gulf. Madame looked curiously at her.

'All the town talks about the magnificence of his bride,' said she.

'Poor Pierre!' Ursule answered, simply, 'I hope he is very happy; he was always good to Louis—always.'

'Whether he is very happy or not, I neither know nor care,' said Madame, who, with womanly inconsistency, was disposed to find fault with Pierre for the very line of conduct which she herself had advocated; 'but, at the bottom of all his little foolishnesses, he has not a bad heart. He has been here more than once to ask after you; and this time he begged me to tell him whether you needed anything. *Tiens*, Ursule, I believe he would yet give you anything he possessed.'

'I believe he would,' said the girl, with a touch of dignity which made Madame feel a little ashamed of her words, 'for Louis' sake. But,' she continued, kneeling down at her old friend's side, with a pretty caressing gesture, 'did you tell him that I had better friends than he could be? I want no more, Madame.'

'And you will not desert us, and go to that cold, foggy England?'

'I? No, indeed.'

'Madame will not rest until she gets there, and then—I foretell the rest—any baby might see it,' said Madame Sanson, throwing out her hands. 'She will be starved to death, with all their proprieties and stiffnesses. Not so much as the sun will be left to warm her poor old heart.'

'But Mr. Blunt would take care of her, do you not think so?' said Ursule, doubtfully.

'Perhaps, yes; perhaps, no. He is half French, to be sure;

but then he could not help himself: he must be different there. And as to his mother—see her letters! Ursule, why does she want you so much?’

‘Is it not strange? I cannot tell.’

‘You must not go.’

‘Listen, Madame. Since I have not had *him*, I think more and more of things which he used to say to me. Many of them, which seemed to be forgotten, have come back lately. And it always grieved him about our father. No. Listen to me patiently: I want you to help me. You know that my father used to be a little bit fond of me; sometimes what I said he attended to, when he cared for no one else: but I was only the more angry with him for it, I could not bear that Louis should be set aside, and I thought of. You know how ill I have always behaved to him. You know that it is no wonder that he should stay away so long. But I have been punished; I was punished when I saw Louis pining to see him once more. If I had been different, he might have clung more to his home. And,’ with a resolute compression of her mouth, ‘now that the past can never be undone, one must think of the future. When my father comes, I am determined that he shall not wish to go away again.’

It was a disjointed speech, but none the less earnest. Madame, who had sat humping her back, and trying to look unimpressible, came round before it was finished.

‘Well,’ said she, shrugging her shoulders, and giving a quaint little grimace of disapproval, ‘if you are bent upon making a victim of yourself, I cannot prevent it. I dare say you are right. But this I say, that you had better keep me out of Jean Lafon’s way; for, as for not telling him something of what he deserves, I can’t do it.’

It was plain that Ursule would have little help here. She sat silent for a moment or two ; then she said,

‘ So, you see, I shall not go to England.’

‘ *A la bonne heure,*’ cried Madame, with one of her quick changes of mood ; ‘ that’s the best thing your father has brought about for a long time. Yes, yes, child, stay at home ; reform him, and take care of us in our old age.’

Ursule was touched to see tears in Madame’s eyes. They brought her the first real conviction that, after all, there was love about her, though not such a love as she had lost, and the young heart rebounded to the touch. She grew more animated than Madame had seen her yet, and made up her mind that here, in devotion to her father and her kind old friend, lay the life-work about which she had thought much lately.

But it is not often that our life-work discloses itself beyond the hour or the day.

A month passed, and September came. Jean Lafon had been absent ever since June ; and although once or twice he had written, he had given no opportunity for an answer. Madame d’Aurigny grew more helpless and more complaining, and still talked of her journey to England. But one morning Madame Sanson came up as hastily as she could to Ursule.

‘ Come—come, quickly, child. There is some fresh news, which has made her like a mad woman !’

In effect, Madame was more excited than Ursule ever remembered having seen her, wringing her hands, gesticulating, sobbing, and entreating them all to hasten, without saying for what. It was many minutes before she let fall anything to enlighten them, although a letter, with an English post-mark, in her lap showed from what quarter the disturbance came.

'See, dear Madame,' Ursule said, soothingly, 'what would you have us do?'

'The boat—the steamer.'

'There, it's the English boat she talks of,' said Madame Sanson, putting the girl aside. 'Madame expects some one; is not that it?'

'Shall I never be understood? Has no one common perception? Can you not so much as find out at what hour we must start?'

The girl and Madame Sanson looked at each other. Madame d'Aurigny broke out again more vehemently,

'I tell you there is no time to lose, with Félicité ill—perhaps dying. Where are my things? How slow you are; you will never be ready!'

'Are you going to England, Madame?'

'Have I not said so twenty times over? and can you not see that in the letter?'

Taking this as a permission, and hoping to put an end to the entanglement of cross-interrogations, Ursule read the letter, written in Clement's bold English hand, although consisting of his mother's words—broken, but as emphatic as ever—desiring her sister and Ursule Lafon to come at once. A postscript from Clement himself gave the key:—'She has been very ill, but is slightly revived. If you can bear the journey, come. The doctor says she is suffering from great anxiety to see you and Mademoiselle Lafon; and we fear the consequences if she is disappointed. As vigorous in mind as ever, but all her bodily powers shattered. I will meet you at Newhaven, for nothing else will content her; otherwise, as you may conceive, I should not leave her.' Underneath was written again, 'Pray come.'

‘And Madame really means to go?’ said Madame Sanson, comprehending at last.

‘It will kill me; but what can I do? If Félicité has set her heart upon it, she will not rest in her grave unless I go,’ answered Madame d’Aurigny, subsiding into tears.

She was so utterly miserable, unreasonable, and overcome, that they could only look pityingly at her, and hastily think what was the best thing to be done. It was at the same time almost a relief to remember that the hour for the departure of the English steamer was already past.

‘I will collect your things, Madame,’ Ursule said. ‘It is too late for to-day; besides which, by to-morrow you will have recovered yourself. M. Blunt knows all about the boats; he will not expect you until to-morrow.’

‘You are coming also?’ said Madame, eagerly.

‘No, indeed, I cannot. I will see you on board, and M. Clement will meet you.’

She expected an outbreak of anger; but Madame only burst into tears, and said no one had any thought for her.

‘Félicité desires it, Félicité desires it,’ she said, crying feebly, in a manner which distressed and bewildered poor Ursule.

‘Dear Madame, I have no right to go, and give up my father.’

‘Yes, your father—your father, whom you respect so greatly, and who cares so much for you! Has your father ever been to you what I have been? And you leave me to go alone among strangers.’

‘I cannot go to England,’ she repeated, in a trembling voice, feeling as if her resolution could scarcely hold out. Fortunately Madame Sanson came to her support.

‘You see, Madame, it is no use to contradict nature; leave her alone, and let us see what you most need for your journey.’

In the midst of the altercation, and the tears which followed, Madame Sanson put her finger to her lips in sign of silence. Tramp, tramp, came a man's step up the stairs. Ursule, too, heard it, and turned pale. She stood motionless for a moment to collect her thoughts, then slipped out of the door, and up the stairs after the step. The young girl went up hastily; the door of her room was already open, and just as she entered the man had flung himself down on a chair, and was unstrapping a heavy knapsack from his shoulders. It was, as she knew, her father.

‘One of you at last,’ he said, drawing down her face to his level, and kissing her airily on both cheeks. ‘I was beginning to wonder whether the nest was altogether deserted, and no one left to say “*Soyez le bienvenu.*”’

He was a little fresh-complexioned man, with a broad forehead, eyes that carried in them a certain sense of humour and enjoyment, but with a sudden falling-off in the narrow tapering jaw—a face that could be pleasant while he was pleased, and perhaps signified that he would not greatly scruple at the means by which his pleasure was to be obtained. He held his daughter an arm's length from him, and looked her up and down with a critical eye.

‘You have lost your roundness of cheek, and have not improved in appearance since last I saw you, child. Heavens, if girls, with all their vanity, would only consider that to lose their look of youth is like losing the bloom off a peach, and take a little more pains to preserve it! And why, since you always wear a dark dress, do you not perceive that a spot of colour is wanted somewhere?—on your bosom, in your hair, where you will, so long as there is some lightening of the sombre effect. You have not employed your advantages, Ursule, as an artist's daughter. How is Louis?’

The easy, indifferent manner gave her strength to answer him steadily.

‘Father, people do not wear dresses so dark as this without cause.’

His fresh complexion faded into a duller hue, and he looked searchingly round the room, as if seeking for signs of his son. But he only said, with a forced laugh,

‘The poor child ! I suppose that means that I have not kept you over-bountifully supplied with money?’

She did not attend ; she was watching his change of countenance, and cried out passionately,

‘Why did you not come ? He asked for you every day——’

She stopped. Her father was standing before her, grasping her shoulder. ‘Dead?’ he demanded, in a hoarse whisper.

No answer was needed ; Jean Lafon read it in her eyes. An expression swept over his face which startled her ; but with a strong effort he controlled himself. When, after a terrible silence of some minutes, she heard him speak, it was to whisper over and over to himself, ‘Marie’s boy ! Poor Marie !’. When afterwards he looked round at her, he had, to all appearance, recovered himself, except that he turned away as if not liking to face her, and sat with his head supported in his hand. He asked a few short questions as to the boy’s death, ending with one for which she was not prepared.

‘What are you going to do ?’

There was a pause, which she broke by saying at last, ‘I hoped that you would stay.’

‘Much advantage that would be !’ said her father, bitterly. ‘No, no ; you have your own friends here, and I will do what I can for you : there is no occasion for your starving. But as to staying here, bah !—these walls suffocate one !’

'So I am to be got rid of, too?'

'Aha! There was my little Ursule again. I thought you had lost all your spirit with your colouring. Got rid of? No, certainly. Stay here, where you have friends? Yes. Why, you would not tramp over the country at my heels, would you? Besides, child, there are other hindrances.'

'But you will come back more often? You will not stay away so long again?'

'Well,' said he, shrugging his shoulders, 'I am not so sure I should be welcome. In effect, I may as well tell you at once, that I came to announce a little fact in my history which I cannot expect will be highly interesting to you, but which it may be as well you should know. Since my departure in June, you have gained a new relation, in the person of a mother-in-law. You will understand, therefore, that this fact necessitates a change in my domestic arrangements.'

'Do you mean that you are already married?' asked Ursule, quietly.

'Precisely. I congratulate you upon two points of character, which, without flattery, I may, I think, conceive to have been derived from me—a power of comprehension, in which I have generally found your sex deficient, and an absence of excitability—a still more rare and precious quality.'

Her hands were locked tightly together. Perhaps he felt more than his words betrayed; certainly she had hard work to keep up the composure he praised.

'Your mother-in-law is a Belgian,' he continued, 'an excellent woman; but I am inclined to think that as she is not exempt from ordinary little weaknesses, a grown-up daughter, however charming, would not add to the harmony of our household. If you will, matters can continue as at present.'



Here you are under the protection of our admirable Monsieur and Madame Sanson—does his appetite continue as absorbing as ever?—and our still more amiable Madame d'Aurigny. I am convinced you will be invaluable to them as a daughter. I have brought you something with which to go on, and I do not mind promising you more regular remittances. Art is in demand, and your mother-in-law possesses substantial advantages which, I feel, are likely to prove a comfort to me in my declining years. Have you any particulars to suggest ?'

'No,' she said. 'You mean, that you leave me to myself?'

'I have the most perfect confidence in your discretion,' he said, drawing out a cigar and proceeding to light it ; 'and I can pay you no higher compliment.'

'Madame d'Aurigny goes to England to-morrow.'

'And wishes you to go with her ? The very thing, my dear child. How fortunate that I should have arrived to-day, just in time to remove any lingering scruples on my account ! The tour will enlarge your mind, and it is not improbable that you may fascinate a rich Englishman. Do not forget my pictures—a few orders would not come amiss ; for however much one may despise their views of art, they have always the merit of paying well. My dear Ursule, I congratulate you.'

She could not answer. However much his long absences had separated him from his children, there was something indescribably bitter in this ready renunciation. The only comfort she felt—and this was uncertain—was a doubt whether he was as easy about it as he represented himself. He moved a little restlessly as he spoke, and he still, as much as possible, avoided looking at her ; but his manner absolutely repelled all tenderness, although he showed no unkindness until, upon his rising

and saying that he was going out, she offered to go with him : then his refusal was actually rough.

'Leave me alone. I want no one.'

She wondered at the change, especially when at the door he turned round in his usual easy way to ask whether he should make inquiries about the next day's steamer.

'If you please,' Ursule said, feeling as if she was in a dream, and a net was closing round her. When he was gone, she went slowly round the room, looking at this, that, and the other, as if she scarcely knew what she was doing ; then she walked out of the door, leaned over the balustrade, and looked up. Her pigeons were waiting for her on the edge of the roof, cooing and pluming themselves in the warm sunshine. Never had the sky looked a deeper, more intense blue. The beauty, the peacefulness, were such as she had never realised before. To gaze into that wonderful depth, and to think of death, was to think of it without the sting ; to remember not the grave, but the resurrection. 'I am not leaving him now,' she said ; 'he is as near in one place as in another.'

She went down-stairs. Madame Sanson was waiting for her at the door.

'Well?' she whispered.

'It was my father. He came to tell us that he has married again. Hush !' she said, stopping Madame's voluble ejaculations. 'And now you must let me go to England, dear Madame, since certainly she wants me more than you do.'

'Oh !' Madame heaved a sigh of dismay.

Ursule went into the room, and walked up to the old lady.

'I will go to England with you, if you desire it, Madame.'

'Félicité desires it,' repeated Madame d'Aurigny ; 'and of course you may go, child, as I have told you twenty times.'

'Why does she want me?' asked the girl, with a sudden access of curiosity.

'You should not ask questions,' answered Madame, looking mysterious, and treating her as she used in the days when she was a little child.

There was hardly time for them. Ursule had as much on her hands as she could get through, with all Madame's things and her own to put together, and only half help from Madame Sanson, who was an unwilling assistant, and thought the whole affair a folly. She worked with all her might to finish what required to be done, and to earn the quiet hour which she promised herself before the evening set in. Her father was not much in the house. When he met Madame Sanson, he treated her with an imperturbable politeness, which irritated her more than any other line of conduct he could have pursued; and he kept up the same impassable barrier between himself and his daughter.

Ursule got out at last, feeling as if she must have time to think, and turning instinctively to the old haunts from which she used to draw the descriptions in which her brother delighted. She wandered into the cathedral, where already the evening shadows were gathering, and only a few solitary worshippers were sprinkled about—peasant-women mostly, with their baskets by their side, having gone in there to offer a few fervent prayers before returning to their homes. Even the yellow wash and the tawdry disfigurements of the interior could not mar the solemnity of the scene. She went softly round to one of the side aisles, where were lovely little canopies, carved in stone so delicately that they looked like fretted lace-work. Her sense of the beautiful made her fonder of the venerable old church than of the bare ugliness which distinguished the little 'Temple,'



*Ursule at her Brother's Grave.*



as Madame persisted in calling it. She prayed more often, as she did on the day in question, in this church than her own.

Coming out, her next point was Louis' grave. When she reached it, she saw that another had been beforehand ; for a wreath of *immortelles*, such as France produces by thousands, lay on the grave. Ursule's eyes brightened when she caught sight of it. Surely her father had done this, and he was not utterly callous. That conviction helped her more than anything else could have helped her through what—try as hard as she might to realise that the grave did not in truth hold him—would seem a leave-taking. It had been a comfort to her, when she was weary and inclined to despond, to steal away to the little quiet corner in the cemetery, and to feel as if there she was nearer him. Yet she did not wish him back again. Every remembrance of him was so pure and saintly, that it seemed unfit he should be mixed up with the sin and struggle of life. It was better that he should be taken from her than be wounded by such scenes as she had gone through that day. And it was a curious effect of her own deepening of character, that she felt as if she was only gradually, now that he was taken away, beginning to understand him. With all their intense love for each other, the two had, so to speak, lived in different elements ; and she had taken a great deal for granted as natural to his temperament and to his state of health, which now she perceived to have been the result of constant watchfulness. Ursule almost triumphed in the thought of his superiority to herself. Then suddenly, with a burst of vehemence, she flung herself by the side of the grave, trembling, and crying out to him under her breath, giving way as she had not done since the funeral. The outbreak of tears relieved her ; she got up, and, with clasped

hands, turned away, and hurried out of the cemetery, not daring to look round again.

She had more to do, however, before she went back to the old house for the last time, and it was growing so late that she hurried along, past the fishermen's quarter and the harbour, to one of the houses, near the sea, where Pierre Renait and his bride were living with Monsieur and Madame Renait the elder. She went quickly up the stairs to the second flat, which was in the occupation of the young couple, and asked to speak to Monsieur Pierre. He was just coming out of the door of his room as she made the request, and, in the fading light, did not at first recognize her. When her voice revealed who his visitor was, she could hardly help smiling at the theatrical gesture in which he indulged; it seemed to her so strangely out of place and unnatural now. She stopped him from speaking with a slight movement of her hand, and said hurriedly,

'Pardon my intrusion, M. Pierre; I will not detain you for more than one little moment. Many months ago you had the goodness to execute a commission for us—to dispose of a little picture, which had been painted by my—my brother.' Her voice faltered, but she went on: 'It is a strange thing in which to ask your assistance, but I am very desirous—I would give all I have to buy it back again.'

'Mademoiselle——' stammered Pierre.

'If you will only tell me to whom it was sold, I ask no more. I am going away from Dieppe to-morrow. I have very little of his belonging to me in the world. You wonder, I dare say, that I have not other drawings; but his strength failed too rapidly for him to do more. I cannot tell you how thankful I should be to see it again.'

Pierre glanced rapidly back at the door. 'Mademoiselle,' he

said, advancing a step nearer, 'the person who possesses that painting values it among his best treasures.'

'He cannot value it as I do,' said Ursule, simply. 'Indeed, M. Pierre,' she continued, with a touch of her old decided manner, 'I have set my heart upon it.'

'And you are leaving Dieppe?' he said, reproachfully.

'To-morrow. There is no time to lose. I am sure you will assist me for Louis' sake.'

'Oh, Mademoiselle——' he wanted to assure her that there was nothing he would not do for her own sake; but a certain quiet dignity in her manner kept him from any display of foolishness. She waited for him to finish his sentence, and, finding he hesitated, said earnestly,

'I have the money with me. Where shall I find the owner?'

'Mademoiselle'—Pierre stepped on one side, laid his hand upon his heart, and made her a sweeping bow—'your charming portrait is in my possession: you do not ask to deprive me of it?'

'You bought it yourself!' Ursule said, a pang crossing her mind at the remembrance of their happy castles in the air. 'Oh, M. Pierre, that was not right of you.'

He hastened to assure her that it was worth all he had paid for it; that several judges had seen and admired it, and would gladly have given orders for its fellow; and concluded by again entreating her not to ask him to restore so highly valued a treasure.

'I know that you prize it for his sake,' she said, gravely, 'but not as I do. You do not know how little is left to me: I cannot give up this.'

He was not proof against her earnestness, and without another attempt at flowery language fetched and placed it in her hands. Tears sprang into her eyes as she looked at it, and Pierre,



whose heart was easily touched, made an awkward though well-intentioned attempt at consolation. He tried to prevent her from giving back the money; but Ursule's will invariably carried the day, and it was the same now. She put out her hand, and said gratefully,

'Thank you, with all my heart. Thank you, too, for all your kindness to him.'

'Is this adieu, Mademoiselle Ursule?'

'Yes. I go to-morrow to England, with Madame d'Aurigny. *Au revoir*, M. Pierre.'

He would have liked a more romantic parting; but Ursule preserved the most common-place demeanour, so that he was obliged to content himself with a profound demonstration of respect in conducting her down the stairs, and out of the large double entrance-doors. Ursule smiled sadly, as she turned towards home, at the thought of Pierre's little weaknesses, which would have made her wholly contemptuous had not his connection with Louis rendered her patient towards him.

'Poor Pierre!' she said to herself; 'evidently he spends more time than ever with the *coiffeur*. And yet he has such a good heart!'

She was too utterly wearied out that evening to feel the strange change that was taking place in her life, and, when the next morning came, steeled herself for all that lay before her, with the determination not to break down. Her father was not altogether like himself, yet he made it as impossible as ever for her to show or extract the least display of affection.

'Such is life!' he said, waving his hands: 'the young birds quit the nest, and find new ones for themselves. Not a word, *mon amie*; your conduct in this matter has been all that there is of admirable. You will be a daughter to that poor old lady;

and I shall console myself with thinking that your virtues are appreciated.’

Madame d'Aurigny was miserably unfit for the journey—crying and nervously irritable, but evidently in greater dread of neglecting Félicité's wish than of any suffering she might endure in obeying it. She was carried down-stairs and into the carriage that was to convey her to the steamer, Madame Sanson—who, between her attempts at cheerfulness, gave way to piteous sobs—accompanying the pair of travellers. M. Sanson afforded the strongest proof of interest of which he had ever been proved capable. He left an omelette to its fate at the most critical period of its existence, and went out of the dark archway to wave his cap and wish ‘*Bon voyage!*’ Jean Lafon, on his side, clapped poor M. Sanson on the back with a vigour which deprived him altogether of breath, and, kissing his hand as the carriage rolled away, exclaimed,

‘A worthy trio, my friend, and one of which you have reason to be proud! I have often remarked that there is in the feminine mind a fund of heroism which is sublime. That is as it should be, is it not? Nevertheless, were I you, I should prefer Madame's affections being less copiously supplied with tears: they are touching, but, to say the least of it, unbecoming. For myself, before my marriage with the present Madame Lafon, I exacted a promise that she would make a point of never weeping in my presence. It saves me a display of sympathy which might be forced, and her the pain of seeing me suffer. *Allons!* shall I assist you in the omelette?’



## CHAPTER XI.

### MADAM BLUNT'S WILL.

Thus some passing qualm to smother,  
Oft will man, too, treat his brother,  
Wronging one to right another.

REV. T. WHITEHEAD.



MADAME D'AURIGNY, enveloped in shawls and cloaks, partly her own and partly provided by the stewardess, was laid upon the deck; for it was thought advisable that she should not undergo the difficulty of being carried up and down the steep descent for the few hours which the passage lasted. Ursule was too much occupied with her to have time to think of her own feelings. When she turned to take a yearning look at the old town, they were already out of the harbour and well on their way. She fancied—but it might have been fancy—that she could distinguish Madame Sanson's figure waving farewells to them from the extremity of the pier, whither she had hurried from the place of embarkation; and she waved again in reply, though tears blotted out not only Madame, but the long beach, and the white houses, and the far-stretching line of white cliffs.

The green waves, tipped with sunlit foam, were cheerful and

invigorating enough to make her for a while watch them with admiration; but, before long, every sensation, save that of misery, was quenched, and she gave herself up to a despairing indifference to the worst that could happen to herself or her fellow-creatures. Fortunately Madame did not suffer any worse ailment than headache, and was able to dispense with her young companion's assistance, although feeling herself victimised by her helplessness, and disposed to blame her for giving way to it. But praise and blame were equally indifferent to Ursule, and she scarcely lifted her head until a compassionate fellow-voyager assured her that her troubles were nearly over, and that they would soon be at Newhaven. Never had the minutes seemed so long as between that promise and the time when she staggered to her feet, and looked despairingly round with the hope of seeing a friendly face among the crowd. None was there; and Madame's tremulous anxiety was beginning to grow into terrified bewilderment, when a man, who had been watching the passengers land, came on board, and addressed himself to her in French, with the inquiry whether she was not Madame d'Aurigny. Further words elicited the fact that Mr. Blunt was not there himself, but that the master of the hotel at Newhaven had that afternoon received a letter from him, which he would have the honour of showing to Madame, and in consequence of which he begged leave to place himself at her service, and to mention that he had made arrangements for her being conveyed to the hotel during the hour or two which Madame would probably require for rest before continuing her journey.

In the midst of the bustle and the perplexities of hearing a strange tongue about them, the two women clung to their new friend as a protector; and Clement's letter had provided for all arrangements that were necessary in carrying Madame d'Aurigny

on shore. Before leaving Dieppe, Ursule had not had the time to dwell upon the minor trials which lay before her, added to which, she had expected to find Mr. Blunt waiting for them upon their arrival; now she felt overwhelmed with her own helplessness, and frightened to remember that she knew nothing of English. Perhaps Mr. Blunt's letter would explain; perhaps he was coming by a later train. She watched eagerly while Madame, in their little room at the hotel, opened the letter which her nephew had inclosed for her in that to the master. A paper fluttered out of it, which Ursule picked up and held in unconsciousness of its character. Madame gave a cry of dismay as she read,

‘Félicité is worse! Clement does not like to leave her.’

‘Are we not to go, then, Madame?’

‘Oh, I do not know; all the words dance before my eyes. She must be very ill, and yet she was always so strong—much stronger than I. *Tiens*, take the letter yourself; read quickly. What does he say? What is that name? Sal—Salis—’

‘Salisbury,’ said Ursule, spelling out the word with a pronunciation very unlike its own. ‘Monsieur says that, after you have rested here a little while, we are to go to this town Salisbury, since it is too far for you to travel to Elmwood to-day. He says we must sleep there, and that he will send another letter there; but we must hurry on as fast as possible, for that his mother asks continually for us both. Dear Madame, why can she wish so much for me?’

‘Oh, do not always think of yourself, Ursule,’ said Madame, pettishly; ‘I am the person to be considered, I think. What are we to do?—what will become of us? I cannot imagine how it is that you should know nothing of English!’

‘M. Blunt says that he incloses you an order for money,

which the landlord here will change. This is it, no doubt,' said Ursule, showing the cheque she held in her hand.

'Yes; Félicité undertook to pay for our journey. Oh, I cannot think what to do next!' Madame repeated, wringing her hands.

'Suppose we ask the—the Monsieur who brought us here when the train will start for Salisbury?' said Ursule, timidly pulling the bell.

The Monsieur was very willing to assist his countrywomen, and had indeed received orders to that effect. He made everything as clear to them as he could, obliged Ursule to repeat over and over again, until she had a chance of being understood, the obnoxious name of Salisbury, and left them with the promise to return and take them to the train in which they were to start.

Madame d'Aurigny, wearied with the voyage and with her lamentations, fell asleep upon the hard sofa on which she was stretched. Ursule, tired as she was, felt far too much excited to sleep, and sat looking wistfully at the black horsehair furniture, which appeared to base its claims to respect upon its ugliness; the round table, with its red figured cloth and its burden of inkstand, woolly mats, and two or three gorgeously bound volumes of the 'Penny Magazine'; the never-failing bronze gas chandelier, all pulleys and chains; the upright chiffonier, with cruet-stand and shells; on the walls, coronation prints and two or three domestic photographs. She looked at them; but all the time she was thinking not so much of those she had left, as of those to whom she was going—of this inflexible Madame Blunt, who had resolved to bring them to England, and had succeeded, whose desire to see her was as persistent as it was unaccountable—of her son, Monsieur Cle-

ment, who had been good to Louis, but evidently, for some cause, disapproved of her. 'He has reason,' Ursule said to herself, humbly and sadly. 'I dare say the young ladies he knows are good and useful, while I am of no use to any one. But why does Madame, his mother, want to see me?'

Puzzle over it as she might, there was no answer to be found to this question.

Madame d'Aurigny did not awake until the Frenchman came in to say that the men were ready to carry her into the railway carriage. He did all that he could to lighten their difficulties, which looked formidable enough to the two inexperienced travellers, especially when added to that dreadful shrinking from the train, which, although Madame had suffered most severely by the accident, seemed to affect Ursule more. He gave them a list of the chief stations through which they would pass, and enlisted the sympathy of the guard on their behalf; so that he assured them they would not be left to their own unaided resources to reach Salisbury, where they would find that Mr. Blunt had written to a hotel-keeper to give them the same sort of reception as he had provided for them at Newhaven. In fact, Clement, in the midst of all his trouble on his mother's account, was sorely perplexed as to the best means of providing, in his hurry, for his helpless old aunt. If his mother was better, he intended, as he told her in a postscript, to meet her at Salisbury; and this hope buoyed up both Madame d'Aurigny and Ursule until, very late in the evening, they reached the termination of their journey, and were again condemned to disappointment.

Ursule was certainly changed. No one could have been more trying during the day than Madame d'Aurigny. She laid the blame of all that did or could happen against her wishes upon her companion, and prophesied more evil than one journey

could well contain. Ursule forced back her own fears to answer with a patience that rarely failed, and to try and divert her mind with remarks upon the country through which they passed—the bright, almost unknown green of the English fields, the sea, the churches, and the little hamlets nestling in picturesque hollows. Madame expatiated freely upon the girl's want of feeling in having the heart to notice such frivolities; but, nevertheless, her naïve remarks assisted to while away the time, until, towards their journey's end, Ursule was shocked to perceive how exhausted Madame d'Aurigny was growing, and how much suffering the constant motion began to cause to her back. Matters did not go on as smoothly at Salisbury as at Newhaven, since the hotel could not produce a Frenchman; and Ursule felt as if they were only parcels, treated without any will of their own, according to the directions written by Mr. Blunt. Luckily, these were explicit, and, between them and the use of signs, they managed to obtain all that they needed; but Ursule, when she had assisted Madame into bed, and watched vainly for some sign of sleep, felt an uncomfortable foreboding that all Mrs. Blunt's commands would not enable her sister to start again on the following morning.

The commands never were issued. With the morning came a telegram from Clement, containing only the words, 'If Madame d'Aurigny has arrived, do not let her leave the hotel until she hears from me.' In the middle of the day, a letter explained the message. Mrs. Blunt had died the previous day; and Clement, breaking the news as gently as possible to her sister, suggested her either coming on at once, or waiting at Salisbury until after the funeral, when he would fetch her himself.

The news came upon Madame d'Aurigny with as great a shock as if she had been wholly unprepared. That Félicité,



whom she had last seen strong, active, and determined, Félicité, with her keen bright eye and springy step, should be dead was utterly inconceivable. She had never so much as thought of her being old, in spite of Clement's descriptions. Descriptions and words, indeed, seldom give us an adequate idea of the change from youth to age, from strength to infirmity, in those we have known intimately. We hear of it ; but, when we see it, we receive the sort of shock that a sudden transition from summer to mid-winter would cause. Félicité had been a link with the youth of past years ; she thought of her as her child-companion, not as the old woman of upwards of three-score years and ten. She had never dwelt much upon her illness ; she had set her heart upon the meeting, and now—Félicité was gone. It was not so much the loss as the disappointment that she felt ; but Ursule did not analyse her feelings, and was greatly touched by a grief which she had not expected to see. Madame's first outcry was to go on, that she might see her sister again ; and neither of them understood how much longer time would elapse between the death and burial than was the case in their own country. However, it was very soon evident that Madame was not well enough to attempt to continue the journey : the news had taken away the spring of action which sustained her, and she gave way completely. Ursule was at her wits' end ; she would have gladly called in a doctor, but, added to Madame's dislike to the idea, there was the difficulty of making themselves understood—a difficulty which had proved serious enough with regard to the telegram. She was, fortunately, provided with the remedies Madame was in the habit of taking ; but this detention, with its solitary dreariness, was very different from their stay at the hospitable farm-house.

The days were very long. Madame d'Aurigny could not

bear to be left alone, and Ursule sat by her bed, rubbed her back, read to her, and chatted as brightly as she could. On Sunday she gained leave to go to church, and, although she hesitated from venturing into the midst of a strange congregation, and dreaded a service in a strange language, yet she longed for the refreshment which even the change from the sick-room would give. When she found herself in the cathedral, her enjoyment was intense. She had been inclined to believe that beautiful buildings and beautiful music belonged only to the Roman Catholic religion, and Salisbury Cathedral was her first assurance of the contrary: The singing was not above the average, but to Ursule it seemed angelic; the organ, in its solitary state, far grander than the orchestral crash in the French churches. She lingered after the service was over, unwilling to tear herself away; and more than one looked with curiosity at the young girl, in her mourning dress, who listened with such rapt attention to the voluntary. But all that she related to poor Madame on her return only had the effect of increasing her misery. She had come—Heaven forgive her!—to a land of heretics, where her soul would be starved, where she could expect no comfort. She had come without advice, simply because Félicité desired it, and, now Félicité was dead, she was dying herself. Ursule would be left to shift for herself in a foreign country, and by that time she would realise a little of all that she—Madame d'Aurigny—had endured for her. It was a country of barbarians, where she could scarcely procure so much as a *sucrier*—where everything was so terribly dear that the money melted away if you looked at it—where the servants were insolent, the food coarse. What would she not give to find herself back with those good Sansons! Ursule grew a little pale as Madame prognosticated her own rapid death and burial.

It was true that, on looking back, she seemed to have run a great risk in making this change of country. Still, surely she had been right. How much worse would Madame's condition have been if she had travelled alone to England! Certainly this sudden, unprepared-for event in the young girl's life was brightened by no happy dreams or golden visions: no soft misty haze hung over her fancies of the future; yet the simple steadfastness with which she faced the dreary monotony she saw before her promised better for her happiness than if she had been buoyed up by a hundred glowing anticipations. She had come to devote herself to Madame, and she had not even a wish to shrink from the task.

She bought an English dictionary and a little book of phrases, and her position being the one exactly the most favourable to learning a language, she gradually made a little way towards being understood. Having a fire in the room, she was also able to prepare things for Madame d'Aurigny, to the intense scandal of the waiter. These were her amusements, and she contrived to extract out of them somewhat with which to entertain Madame. A letter came from Clement, promising that he would be with them the day after the funeral—in two days' time—and earnestly hoping that his aunt would be sufficiently recovered to return with him to Elmwood. She, for her part, insisted on the impossibility; but Ursule perceived, from one or two words which she let drop, that her real intention was to go; and her state of health appeared to hinge so completely upon her mind and will, that it was possible she might, indeed, brace herself to the effort. At all events, it was a comfort that she could be roused to think of action, for her spirits were growing worse and worse under the confinement and solitude of her present life.

On the morning of the day when her nephew was expected, Madame for the first time proposed to leave her bed ; and she also insisted upon Ursule's making everything ready to start, while, at the same time, protesting that her own departure was an impossibility. She sent Ursule into the town to procure some medicine ; and when she returned, Clement had arrived, and Madame d'Aurigny was eager to leave at once. He would not agree to this, but persuaded her to wait for the next day ; and, in fact, the excitement of seeing him, and hearing all that he had to relate, was quite as much as her feeble strength would bear. Ursule herself had a day of liberty—Madame wanted no one but her nephew ; and the girl rambled away for hours, with a sense of freedom which was a delight to one so little accustomed to restraint as she had been. She was never weary of looking at the Cathedral, and often she caught herself in the old habit—the hardest of all to break off after daily companionship—of storing up something to relate to Louis. She went through the streets and stared into the shops with a girl's delight. Then she crossed the meadows, and wandered along by the side of a delicious trout stream, rapid and clear as glass, and under trees just tinged with autumnal tints, and past cottages set in gardens blazing with scarlet geraniums and roses ; and looked back upon the delicate grey spire rising out of the level, and down into the waving beds of weed in the river ; and at last walked reluctantly home, with a face so bright and cheerful, that Clement involuntarily pronounced the same verdict of want of feeling. He was himself worn and wearied ; his mother's illness had ended in a comparatively sudden manner, and without any return of consciousness during the last two days. Until then she had been continually restless and agitated about seeing her sister and Ursule ; but after the third paralytic stroke there was unbroken

insensibility. Ursule pitied him from her heart, when she saw his face, and understood how much the idea weighed upon him that Madame d'Aurigny had given up her country and her home, and was in a manner dependent upon him. She tried all the more to speak hopefully of her state, and to raise his spirits ; and she succeeded in some measure, although only at the cost of strengthening his preconceived opinion. When he left the room, she was astonished at his saying that he would be glad to speak to her in the sitting-room he had engaged, whenever in the course of the evening she was able to leave his aunt ; but Madame d'Aurigny herself treated it so lightly, and was so persuaded that he only wished to arrange matters for her comfort on the next day, that she felt ashamed of her own curiosity.

She could not go down until rather late in the evening, when Madame was asleep. Clement opened the door in answer to her knock, and drew a chair for her near the fire. He was so long, however, in opening the conversation that she said, timidly,

‘ Did you wish to speak to me ? ’

‘ I beg your pardon,’ he said, starting, ‘ I have no right to detain you ; but, to tell the honest truth, I was thinking how to begin. Mademoiselle, have you never wondered why my poor mother wished so greatly to see you ? ’

‘ Yes, very often,’ said Ursule, eagerly. ‘ I have asked Madame frequently, but she always said that I must wait.’

‘ She left the explanation to my mother, and, now that it is too late for you to receive it from her lips, it is only due to you to explain it.’

‘ I can wait still,’ said she, in a low voice, noticing his compressed lips.

'Thank you. It is necessary that you should understand the matter without further delay. We must go back in your history, Mademoiselle Lafon. Your mother, I believe, died while you were very young?'

'Seven years old, Monsieur.' replied Ursule, wondering what was coming.

'And your grandfather and grandmother—do you remember them?'

'I can just remember something of my grandfather: but I was very little when he died; and then we soon left Nantes and came to Dieppe.'

'And your grandmother's name was——'

'Laget—Ursule Laget. I am called after her.'

'Did your mother ever tell you stories about what happened to her when she was young, or that her father and mother had told her? Children have those sort of things told them, you know,' continued Mr. Blunt, seeing that Ursule hardly knew what to make of his cross-questioning.

'She never had time for stories,' said Ursule. 'I can't recollect any.'

'Then I will tell you one. Listen. A long time ago, when France was shedding blood without mercy, a little child was carried out to be shot in the horrible *fusillades* of Nantes. A man saved her—a man who had no children of his own at that date, or he could hardly have consented to be one of the murderers of those little ones. He atoned for his sin by the act; for it was at the peril of his own life that he managed to convey this little frightened child home to his wife; it was at the peril of both their lives that he and she kept her with them until they could convey her to her friends at Bordeaux. Is this story new to you?'

‘Quite.’

‘But you have guessed something of the truth? The little child was called Félicité Devaux; the man and his wife were Jacques and Ursule Laget.’

‘It was your mother?’

‘It was my mother whom your grandfather saved.’

‘Oh, I am glad,’ said Ursule, clapping her hands. ‘It is like a romance. But I never knew it; how did you find it out?’

‘Your name gave the clue. Somehow or other, my father and mother lost sight of your family after the death of your grandmother: my father intended to go to Nantes to make inquiries whom Marie Laget had married; but he died, and my mother lost heart for everything. When first I heard your name, it sounded familiar to me; and, directly I mentioned it, my poor mother did not rest until she heard more. Do you not remember Madame d’Aurigny’s questions?’

‘Oh, yes; how they puzzled me! And it was this which made Madame Blunt desire to see me? I wish——’

‘Yes,’ said Clement, divining what she would have said. ‘It is curious that she longed more earnestly to see you—Ursule Laget’s grandchild—than her own sister.’

Ursule’s eyes sparkled. ‘I am sure I should have loved her,’ she said.

‘This is not all that I have to notify to you, Mademoiselle,’ said Clement, gravely. ‘I should have let my aunt have the pleasure of repeating that little history, had there not been a sequel which was only known to me yesterday. I must ask you now to listen to details of a different nature. I can only promise to make them as short as I can.’

‘Go on, if you please, Monsieur.’

‘You are aware, perhaps, that we—my mother and I—have

hitherto lived in a small cottage at Elmwood, close to the Rectory gate.'

'*Plait-il ?*' said Ursule, looking bewildered.

'Ah, well, never mind. I ought to have remembered that you could not be expected to know the localities. However, it is a cottage which my father at his death left to my mother, not for her use only, but absolutely—for her own, for her to give to whom she would, together with a sum of money amounting altogether to five thousand pounds.' Clement did not add that this bequest was made because his father did not doubt that the money and the house would go to him as their natural channel ; but he asked, 'You understand me so far?'

'Yes, certainly,' answered Ursule, absently ; for her thoughts had wandered away to the story of the *fusillades* of Nantes.

'By a codicil of her will, lately executed, the Cottage at Elmwood, with a legacy of four thousand pounds, is left to Mademoiselle Ursule Lafon, and to her heirs for ever.'

'I beg your pardon, Monsieur,' said poor Ursule, trying to collect her thoughts, and feeling guilty of having got herself into a puzzle by her inattention. 'I am afraid I do not comprehend.'

'The Cottage is given to you by my mother.'

'To me ! Oh, Monsieur, it must all be a mistake?'

Clement thought so himself. The idea of his old home falling into the hands of this French girl was indescribably bitter. But he could only assure her that it was as he had said.

'The house and the money,' he repeated.

Ursule's head was in a whirl. 'Is it not rightly yours?' she said.

'I have enough,' answered Mr. Blunt, shortly. 'The person to be most pitied is my aunt. She receives only a thousand pounds.'



It is enormous !' sighed Ursule, to whom either sum seemed like a fabulous amount, especially when Mr. Blunt reduced them into francs ; 'but I see that I have the most. Ought not Madame d'Aurigny to have mine ?'

'No,' said Clement, smiling for the first time, and poking the fire into a cheerful blaze. 'There are your heirs, you know, to be considered ; and you have no right to give it away. Do not talk about what you will do to-night ; we will all go back to the Cottage to-morrow, and then you shall think it over.'

'But I may speak of it to Madame ?'

'No ; I must ask you to say nothing. I would rather tell my aunt myself ; and she is not fit to bear additional excitement of any kind until the journey is over.'

'I think this must all be a dream,' said Ursule, standing up to go, and rubbing her eyes.

Clement lit her candle, and opened the door. 'Good night, Mademoiselle Lafon,' he said.

She reproached herself on the stairs with having forgotten his loss, and the pain it must have given him to mention details, in the midst of her own wonder. It was more wonder than delight ; the whole affair seemed so inexplicable, so strange, that she could scarcely believe she had heard aright. Of course, the Cottage and the money would be as much Madame's as hers ; they might live there, and Mr. Blunt also : she had even visions of M. and Madame Sanson joining them ; and yet she shook her head at the idea of living in England. All her thoughts were in confusion, and her dreams that night were not more unconnected than were her waking fancies.

Mr. Blunt, meanwhile, thought bitterly of the change that hung over his head : it was a dreadful wrench to him to quit the Cottage ; and he did not like the prospect of his old aunt's

dependence upon this young, inexperienced, and, as he believed, selfish girl, whose generosity, although it might be equal to spasmodic efforts, would give way under any continuous strain. He wished that his mother had taken him into her confidence, and that he had persuaded her to reverse her gifts. He shrank from the task of telling Madame d'Aurigny. She had given up all her habits of life, and made an immense effort to fulfil her sister's wishes, and naturally would be hurt at a stranger receiving this proof of preference. To make an arrangement for her would be his first care. Probably, Ursule would choose to let the Cottage as soon as the business-matter was explained to her, and return to France, to escape a country life which could have few charms for one totally unaccustomed to it. Dieppe was not Paris, certainly ; but it possessed a certain stir and excitement very much beyond anything to be found at Elmwood, which made Clement almost smile at the comparison.

And for himself? Well, that question was tolerably easy to answer. Since the Cottage was gone, he must take up his quarters altogether in Defforton, instead of going there by train every morning. Whether he could afford to support his aunt with him as well—whether he could endure the continual restraint which her presence would cost him—whether she would herself be happy in the position—these were points which must be well weighed before decided upon, and he had scarcely strength or spirit for them as yet. He would wait. A day or two might assist him in the decision. Madame d'Aurigny would know the facts, and form her own wishes. Clement did not cast one thought of blame on his mother for the burden that was brought upon him, but he could not shut his eyes to the fact that a burden it must be.

The next morning found Madame d'Aurigny suffering no

little pain, but eager to be off. She would not even remain until the later train, which Clement thought would have given her time to rest ; and the only means of quieting the restlessness which, at such times, grew actually distressing to witness was by forestalling the time fixed for their departure. They travelled in greater comfort this time, with Mr. Blunt to depend upon, and Ursule could sit quietly in the corner of the carriage, and look out at the beautiful trees, only losing their summer roundness to gain a glory in colour, at the grey homesteads, the quiet little streams patiently making their way through the fields, the stacks of corn, and the heaps of yellow apples in the orchards, which looked like Normandy. The wind was high ; grey clouds drifted across the sky ; here and there a bit of soft blue shone out between them. Mr. Blunt wondered why Ursule's face, remarkable for its quick changefulness of expression, had settled into that of calm, peaceful happiness. He was apt to be obstinate in his opinions, and he determined that she was looking forward to all that was before her, and to the comparative riches she was to enjoy. Never was anything further from her mind. She was thinking, as all beautiful things made her think, of Louis—his love and his happiness. To have lost him was to have lost the better half of herself ; but not for an instant now did she grudge him what he had received. He had entered into his rest, and for her there was the work yet to do. The work ! Yes. With all her weakness, her failures, her wilfulness, there was the life-work which only the strongest could accomplish—a prospect which might well have cast her back despairing, had she not learned in that very time, which seemed the darkest in her life, to know that, would she but cling to the unfailing truth, there was for her a Strength that was supreme.



## CHAPTER XII.

### URSULE'S WELCOME.

"Who's he?"

"Dunno. A stranger."

"A stranger? 'Eave 'arf a brick at 'n."

*Punch.*

'**M**Y dear nephew, I see nothing but trees.'

'We have left the village.'

'But where, then?'

'Did you not see the houses and a few shops opposite the station as we left it?'

'I saw nothing to deserve the name of a town.'

'We do not aspire to such dignity. If you want to find a town, you must go back to Defforton, through which we passed.'

'Ah!' Madame d'Aurigny looked gloomy; Ursule watched every turn of the road with interest.

'I do not see any acacia-trees,' she said, at last, in her turn.

'No; but these elms are finer than your poplars,' returned Mr. Blunt, jealous for the honour of the Elmwood trees.

'Bah! what villanous roads!' she exclaimed, a little maliciously, as the fly jolted over a new layer of stones.

Clement felt unreasonably indignant, forgetful that he had himself provoked the retort by his comparison. The three

drove on in silence, until he pointed out the glimmer of blue sea in the distance, as an object which belonged alike to both countries, and was almost pacified by Ursule's exclamation of admiration at the soft red colouring of the earth. Presently, he touched Madame d'Aurigny's arm.

'You cannot see more than a corner of the tower ; but the church is there—just hidden by that clump of trees—and the churchyard where she is buried.'

'Not in the cemetery ! Poor Félicité !'

There was silence again for a few moments, when Mr. Blunt showed them the entrance to the Rectory, and in another minute the fly stopped.

'This is the Cottage,' said Clement, gravely.

The Cottage, which fully answered to its name, stood back perhaps twenty feet from the high road. First came a green paling, then a little grass-plot, in one corner of which stood a fine horse-chestnut overhanging the road. Flowers were dotted about in small bright masses, and the covered-way of trellis-work which led to the house was twined over with clambering plants. The Cottage was long and irregularly built ; thatched, moreover, to Ursule's great wonder. An old servant came to the door, in whose face was written anything but welcome : between them, Madame d'Aurigny was carried into a passage, up a few stairs into a tiny hall, and then into a drawing-room of much better size and proportion than might have been expected from the appearance of the house. There was a bright fire burning, and it looked home-like and cheerful. Two long French windows opened upon the garden, which on this side was of considerable extent, walled all round, and broken with picturesque clumps of trees—a young and beautifully shaped cedar and two handsome ilexes among the number. Every-

thing grew luxuriantly : rhododendrons feathered grandly over the grass ; great fuchsias towered into shrubs, roses peeped over the wall ; a venerable myrtle-tree and a white jessamine fairly covered one side of a gable, and pushed their branches into the thatch. On one side of the drawing-room was a conservatory, into which a door opened. From it, you could in a moment reach an old-fashioned kitchen-garden, which never failed to produce its annual abundant store of fruit—a garden with sunny nooks where rosy strawberries ripened, and white-heart cherries grew yellow and waxy.

From the top of the garden, near a greenhouse, in which the finest grapes flourished without further heat than that of a Devonshire sun, you gained a good idea of the irregularities and length of the Cottage, and a delightful view of the sea, the red cliffs, and the harbour, with its shipping and long sandy reach, on the southern side. Ursule did not see all this at once. She was enchanted with the house and garden ; but she did not dare openly to display much delight when she imagined Mr. Blunt's feelings, and encountered Sarah's hostile glances. She scarcely thought of it in the way they were thinking—that it was her own ; only as a charming place where they were all perhaps going to live, and which looked too bright and flowery for the *tristesse* she had anticipated.

A bunch of flowers on the table were so prettily arranged, that Ursule could not resist saying, 'How pretty !'

Mr. Blunt looked at them as he was giving Sarah the keys to bring wine for his aunt, and thought the same.

'Who put them there ?' he asked.

'Miss Elsie, Sir,' said Sarah, severely. 'She came this morning, before I knew what she was about, or for certain I shouldn't have allowed her to mess up any such nonsense.'

Clement translated as much of the speech as he thought advisable ; and Ursule's eyes brightened at the idea of this Mademoiselle Elsie, who had effected a little friendly act of welcome. She wished to be on amicable terms with everybody. When Sarah brought in the tray, she ran to help her so deftly and readily, that the old servant almost relented ; but Madame d'Aurigny called her back to her side with a sharp ' Ursule ! ' Madame felt her own dignity bound up in her companion, and feared lest the conduct of the latter might betray the manner in which they had lived.

A terrible chilliness grew over the whole party. Clement, however much he exerted himself, could not be otherwise than grave and silent ; Madame looked sadly round at the memorials of Félicité ; Ursule began to recognize the position in which she stood, and to feel as if her new possessions would not bring her much pleasure. It was a relief when a young retriever appeared at the window, and made such demonstrations of joy at seeing his master, that it became necessary to open the window and allow him to expend his delight in ecstatic capers.

' I have rested sufficiently to go to my room,' said Madame, wearily.

' It is close at hand,' Clement said ; ' we have only to get you up a few steps, and you will be in it.'

' This is a pretty place, Clement. Poor Félicité, she must have had all that she could want ! Everything is yours, I suppose ?'

' You shall hear the arrangements to-morrow,' answered Mr. Blunt ; while Ursule felt herself becoming hot and red. ' After you are settled in your room, I shall walk over to the Rectory ; and, if Mademoiselle is not tired——'

‘Do not call her *Mademoiselle*,’ said Madame, sharply. ‘She is Ursule Lafon.’

‘If you are not tired,’ repeated he, without taking any notice except to address her directly, ‘I dare say you will like to go into the garden by-and-bye. You won’t lose yourself; and I don’t know that there is anything very wonderful for you to see. But there are plenty of grapes in the greenhouse, if you will take the trouble to gather them.’

‘Thank you. I——’

‘Ursule will have enough to do in attending to me,’ interposed Madame d’Aurigny for the second time; and Clement gave up the attempt to provide amusement for his guest. It was late in the afternoon before she was released by Madame’s falling asleep, and then she was too tired herself to do much in the way of exploring. She went to her own room, full of delight at the quaint room, with its steps, angles, and crannies, its paper of twining roses, its green paint, and, above all, its old-fashioned window-seat, on which perching herself, she found the harbour and the sea lying before her, looking grey and angry in the fading light, and with a rising wind foretelling a storm. Presently she was glad to go down to the deserted drawing-room, and to sit over the fire, learning diligently from her phrase-book by the light of the flickering flame

Clement, meanwhile, had not far to walk—the green gate which led into the Rectory shrubbery was almost within a stone’s throw of the Cottage door—Jock, in high delight at possessing his master at an unusual hour of the day, bounding before him, and relieving his spirits by hunting imaginary foes with an energy which was altogether superfluous. The gate swung heavily behind Clement as he walked up the drive towards the house; on each side lay the shrubbery, faced by a narrow border



of flowers and grass. The Rectory itself was an old red brick house, mellowed by age into the colour of sandstone, and built squarely and solidly, with a good substantial porch and broad windows. Two or three tall climbers, a glossy-leaved banksia rose, and a Virginian creeper softened the rather hard outlines; and, in front of the house, the grass sloped away towards fields and trees—the sea, of course, visible, and making the point of the picture. The garden was not in the same good order as that at the Cottage; the shrubs wanted cutting back, and the creepers nailing. Clement stooped to pull up an obtrusive piece of groundsel which grew out of a clump of carnations close to the door. Jock, giving a sigh of resignation, lay down outside the porch, his nose between his paws, but his watchful eyes contradicting his attitude of rest.

Passing through a substantial, well-proportioned hall, Clement opened the door of the drawing-room and looked in. It was empty: an old grand piano, which almost filled one side, was open and strown with music, and there were other signs of recent feminine occupation in the one deep oriel window of the room; but no person was to be seen, and, retiring upon his steps, he made his way to a small apartment, professedly used as a breakfast-room, but in reality given over to the disposal of the younger members of the family. Two girls were there—Anne and Elsie—at first sight apparently as great a contrast as sisters well could be.

There was no marked difference in their height. Anne was, perhaps, an inch the shorter; but she stooped, and Elsie was as straight as a dart, lithe, and carrying her head like a queen. Anne had a round homely face, with irregular features, and no charm about it, but that of a certain frank honesty. Elsie's eyes were large and velvety, her skin was clear, her nose small

and straight, her mouth and chin delicately cut. The sisters' hair was of almost the same shade of brown; but while the general impression of Anne's consisted in the idea that it was arranged in the most unbecoming manner, Elsie's was loosely twisted up in a fashion which could not have been improved upon by an artist. It was the same with their dress. The material was the same, the trimmings exactly similar, and yet the contrast was carried out as thoroughly as in all other points. Clement, intimately as he knew them, could never fail to be struck with it when he saw the two sisters together.

There was a little restraint in their manner when they came forward to greet him, as if they were afraid lest something they might say or do would jar upon the grief that had fallen upon him. Anne asked him, nervously, whether he had seen her father.

'I don't know where he is; but I will try to find him, if you like,' she said.

'Thank you, I have no reason for disturbing him; I believe I chiefly wanted to see Miss Villars.'

'And she has driven out with Bella.'

'Oh, Clement,' exclaimed Elsie, unable any longer to keep back the question which she was longing to put, 'are they come?'

'Hush, Elsie!' whispered Anne, looking distressed.

'Yes,' answered Mr. Blunt, throwing himself into a basket-chair, 'they are come. My poor aunt looks dreadfully worn out; I feel certain she ought to see Mr. Ferguson, but whether she will or not is another matter.'

'And this French young lady——?'

'Well, yes,' said Clement, a little bitterly, 'she is come, too.'

'Have you told her? What does she say?'

'She could not very well say much: I suppose she is fully alive to her luck. I should not care, so long as I believed she would——' be kind to Madame d'Aurigny, he was going to add, but prudently forbore to finish his sentence. 'The fact is, I imagine, that to see the old place in strangers' hands must always be hateful, and so one may as well make up one's mind to the prospect.'

'I hate strangers.'

'Well done, Elsie.'

'I do, and I don't care who hears me say so. They are always disagreeable and in the way. At all events, I hope this Miss——'

'Ursule Lafon.'

'This Miss Lafon acknowledges that she never saw any place so pretty as Elmwood.'

'I suspect she gives the palm of beauty to Dieppe.'

'Then she can't know anything about it. She must be horrid.'

'What nonsense!' put in Anne, impatiently. 'Elsie, you are always thinking about things being pretty; so far as that goes, I dare say one place is as good as another.'

'Anne would not mind if we lived in a country as flat as this table, with two or three old pollarded elms growing out of the middle of it!'

'So long as there were no people,' sighed Anne.

'I won't have you two setting yourselves up against my visitors,' announced Clement, authoritatively. 'I mean you to befriend Mademoiselle Lafon, to make her at home here, if she continues to live at the Cottage, and to teach her English.'

'Does she talk nothing but French?' exclaimed Elsie, in a

tone of horror. 'Oh, how dreadful! how detestable! I shall keep out of her way.'

'You can manage better than I can,' said Anne. 'I am sure I cannot say three words without a mistake. Clement, I wish she had not come.'

'Perhaps Bella could talk,' hazarded her sister doubtfully.

'You are no better than two foolish children. Don't you see how much you may improve yourselves?' said their cousin, by way of answer.

'What's the use?' replied Elsie, wilfully. 'We don't mean ever to go abroad, and accents and all the rest of it are no use in scrambling through a French exercise.'

'There spake the sagacious Walter.'

'It is quite true.'

'Quite—if the worth of a language consists in being able to scramble through its exercises.'

'Pray do not quarrel with him, Elsie,' said Anne, anxiously. 'There is no occasion for your having very much to do with Miss Lafon.'

'Then you do not acknowledge the duties of hospitality?'

Clement was certainly in a singularly contradictory humour, and more disposed than he had yet been to take Ursule's part.

'Yes, I do. What *do* you mean?' said poor Anne, looking ready to cry.

'Never mind. I beg your pardon, Anne; I am sure you will be all that is kind; and, as for Elsie, she has already bestowed her welcome in the shape of her flowers.'

'Oh, she is welcome to everything except my French.'

Clement made no answer. Anne went back to the slow and painful copying of a receipt into a manuscript book, and Elsie

took the bit of groundsel from her cousin's hand, and twisted it in and out between the bars of a canary's cage.

'You have not told us, after all, what she is like,' she said, returning to the subject which occupied all their thoughts.

'Not a bit like her brother, poor boy! His was one of the purest, most spiritualized faces I ever saw. I have seen such a one in a photograph from one of the old Italian masters, but in real life never.'

'And he is dead. Did she feel it very much?'

'I don't know.'

'Did they live alone?'

'Quite alone, as far as I saw; at the top of the queerest old house, with an oak staircase that was fit for a palace, and all the rest miserable! How many more questions am I to answer, Elsie?'

'Twenty; and then we will look at poor Anne's receipt-book, and we shall find neatly copied out—"To five Miss Lafons add the yolk of three eggs." Will that be our new pudding, Anne?'

'I cannot think why cook is so fond of trying new puddings,' said Anne, despairingly. 'The old ones are much better.'

"You and Elsie are true conservatives, Anne—puddings, strangers, and all! Well, Elsie, what final demand trembles upon your tongue?'

'Is she pretty?'

'I cannot tell; I wish I could. She has a brown face and bright eyes, with hair to match, short and wavy. Is that being pretty?'

'It doesn't sound so. But I am never certain, Clement, how much to believe of your descriptions.'

'Come and see for yourself to-morrow, then.'

'Aunt Clare is sure to go.'

‘And Bella is dying of curiosity.’

‘Is she?’ said Mr. Blunt, curtly. He looked so sad, that the sisters did not like to say anything more. Elsie was afraid she had been indiscreet; and Anne, who was always fearful of hurting people’s feelings, stooped more than ever over the table.

‘You have heard nothing about Joyce’s coming, I suppose?’ he asked, after a long silence.

‘No; the last letter said she was too busy to leave London. Mr. Clayton has been ill, and Joyce has a great deal on her hands. It must be dreadful to be in that horrible London all through the summer and autumn!’

Decided likes and dislikes were among the Follaton peculiarities, arising in a great measure from their having lived almost entirely among themselves, and received no modifications of their opinions. It must be fairly conceded that any life differing from their own ran a chance of being called horrible, and Clement took no notice of the adjective; in fact, in this instance he was disposed to endorse it.

‘I wish she were here,’ was all he remarked.

‘So do I,’ answered Elsie, heartily. ‘Are you going, Clement?’

‘Yes, if there is no chance of my seeing Miss Villars. But, I say, Anne, I would sooner one of you came to-morrow than Bella. You must not let these nonsensical fancies stand in your way.’

Anne looked awkward, twisted her shoulders after an ungainly fashion, and murmured something which was inaudible. Clement treated it as a promise by saying, ‘Don’t forget,’ as he went out of the room, and the two sisters were left alone.

‘Poor fellow! he looks wretchedly fagged and ill,’ said Elsie,

coming over to her sister, and leaning her two hands on the table.

‘Yes; I could not bear to see him.’

‘I have no patience with all this unnecessary bother that he has to endure. As if Mrs. Blunt could not have left the Cottage to him, instead of entailing no end of misery and disagreeables! It is just like her!’

‘Oh, Elsie!’

‘It is. People have no right to expect their injustice to be praised, because they are dead.’

‘There is that old story, you know.’

‘So there is! Do you know, I had almost forgotten it,’ said Elsie, thoughtfully. ‘I suppose that does put some romance into the affair.’

Anne could not understand romance improving anything; but she did not answer, because she was taken up with ruefully contemplating a large blot in the very middle of her neatly copied receipt.

‘Oh, dear, I have spoilt it all!’ she exclaimed.

‘I don’t see why you should mind,’ said Elsie, mischievously. ‘I dislike it because it is ugly; but you often say you don’t see any difference.’

‘It is not the ugliness, but because it is untidy,’ protested Anne.

‘Oh, well, I suppose order takes the place of beauty in some minds.’

‘And I had resolved to cure myself of that habit of making blots. I wanted very much to have kept this book clean.’

‘Nobody will find fault with you; that’s one comfort!’

Anne’s eyes filled with tears.

‘You don’t really think so! But then you don’t require it as

I do. I feel continually as if I were going all wrong, and wanted to be picked up and put right again.'

'Like the dropped stitches in Aunt Clare's stocking,' said Elsie, laughing merrily, but at the same time stooping over her sister to give her a hearty kiss. 'Anne, I believe we poor motherless girls ought to have some indulgence.'

Anne shook her head, unwilling to follow Elsie's flights of imagination. 'I wish you were the eldest!' she said, with a sigh.

'As if I did not domineer sufficiently over you without that advantage!'

'I dare say it is as much that I might escape things as for any other reason,' was Anne's not very lucid explanation. 'Oh, those dreadful dinner-parties! I never know what to do—what to say! and one feels a goose with the other girls talking as if they liked it. I wish people would eat their dinners at home! If Mrs. Chambers persuades papa into making me go with her to Ordleigh at Christmas, what will become of me!'

'I never mean to go to parties,' said Elsie, decidedly. 'I should run away in the middle. One daughter is quite enough, and by that time you will have become used to them.'

'I don't think that is possible. Luckily, Bella will enjoy them.'

'Bella! Yes; Bella will enjoy anything in the shape of a show off.'

'I wonder if it will be good for her? If there were any one from whom Bella would take advice? She is afraid of papa.'

'Yes; she is afraid of him, and I fear—Anne, do you know, I am sure Bella is not open and honest.'

'I try not to believe it, but—I don't know. I wish she minded Aunt Clare!'



‘Oh, but, then, nobody minds Aunt Clare. Hark! I hear papa calling. It is you, Anne; make haste!’

Clement Blunt did not return directly to the Cottage from the Rectory. He went along a narrow path which pierced the shrubberies, and out of a little turnstile gate into the churchyard. The grey perpendicular tower, nobly flanked by three fine elms, was the pride of the neighbourhood, and the point of attraction for all travelling antiquaries: those upon whom it had a dearer claim of love believed that nothing could equal St. Mary’s tower, in its quiet and solemn beauty. Yet the church itself had fallen into bad repair, and whitewash and high pews reigned triumphantly within. In the churchyard, what beauty there was belonged only to the natural form of the ground, the stately trees, and the little transparent brook which ran directly across it; for the grave-stones themselves were of the ugliest type, and the grass was coarse and ragged.

Clement made his way to a corner where the graves were less crowded, and where, in a vault surrounded with railings, his mother had been laid to rest by the side of her husband and the little ones who had gone early to their Home. He thought of her as a son, and, although his love for her was not that intense affection which he had given to his father, he felt very desolate as he looked down upon her resting-place. She had been fond of him in a fashion; but her heart had been given to another son, his elder brother, a merry, high-spirited, impetuous boy. He came home from school ill; the illness turned to fever; little Clement took the infection, and both were at the point of death. It really seemed as if Mrs. Blunt, who had almost demanded her favourite boy’s life with all the passionate force of her will, never forgave Clement for having been the one to struggle through the illness while Hugh was taken. There was

his name before his brother now, in letters worn away by exposure—'Hugh Clayton Blunt, aged fourteen.' There was the space where hers would be added to the list.

It is possible that the lack of, at all events, outward affection had tended, in some degree, to harden Clement, who possessed a good deal of womanly sensitiveness, and was all the more likely to grow severe. Madam Blunt—as the people about were in the habit of calling her, from some idea of thus marking her French origin—never indulged in demonstrations of feeling, or sought sympathy from others. She nursed her sorrows without allowing them to be shared, even by her son. She became rigid, inflexible, unsparing. She was generous-hearted, and cared not how freely she gave when the fancy seized her; but also she was not sufficiently generous to brook the burden of an obligation. To the last she had been the same, and not even the softening influences of sickness and pain had betrayed her into what she called weakness.

Her son knew something of this as he stood mournfully looking down. He understood the character of the impulse which led her to act as she had done towards the granddaughter of the old couple who had saved her life. She could not endure to go to the grave feeling as if they had never been repaid; she would repay them in the person of Ursule, at whatever cost. Clement had always known that he must leave the Cottage, and devote himself to his work; but he had cherished the hope of returning to it at a future time. He did not blame his mother; but he felt it hard—the more so from her not having taken him into her confidence, and allowed the news to fall upon him unprepared. It was the old avoidance of sympathy which had pained him throughout his life, and followed him to her very grave. He turned away with a sigh, and walked

rapidly back to the Cottage, sore at heart, and, although he would not have acknowledged it, in great need of some comforting and kindly words.

Ursule, poring by fire-light over the English words which refused to accommodate themselves to her pronunciation, heard a step in the passage, and a hand upon the lock. But when the hand was withdrawn, and the steps retired, she made up her mind that Mr. Blunt was afraid of finding her in the drawing-room, and wished with all her heart that she knew what it was right to do, and that she had remained in her own room. She was correct in her supposition. Clement had entered the house almost mechanically; but at the door of the drawing-room the idea flashed upon him that he might come upon Ursule ensconced there, and the prospect of a *tête-à-tête* was too distasteful to be encountered. He was scarcely, however, better pleased, when he took refuge in his room, to find Sarah unpacking his portmanteau, and resolutely determined upon a delivery of her opinions.

‘Is my aunt comfortable?’ he inquired.

‘She’s asleep, if that’s what you mean. Oh, Mr. Clement!’

‘Well, Sarah?’ he said, kindly. She had been a faithful servant for many years, and he felt she deserved consideration.

‘It can’t be true. My mistress has never left the house to that French girl?’

‘There was a reason for it, you know. My mother was under an obligation to Mademoiselle Lafon’s family.’

‘There couldn’t be no right reason for taking it from her own son. For my part, I don’t believe the will would hold.’

‘Hush, Sarah,’ said her master, authoritatively; ‘you don’t know what you are saying. My mother’s desire would have been enough for me, without other safeguards. The Cottage was her

own. She was not a person to do things lightly; and if she desired in this manner to repay some of the debt she owed to the Lagets, she was quite right to do it.'

Clement's manner was such that Sarah was awed. She only ventured to express her irritation by a certain vehemence in the arrangement of his clothes, and by murmuring, under her breath, 'A French girl!'

'Thank you, Sarah,' said Mr. Blunt, laughing; 'you will perhaps remember that I am half French myself.'

'She can't speak a word fit to be understood!' grumbled the old servant, taking no notice. 'Don't you suppose, Mr. Clement, that I am going to stay here with her.'

'No one wants you to do what you dislike,' said he, impatiently; 'but it is impossible for things to settle themselves in twenty-four hours. As yet, my aunt does not even know of either Mademoiselle Lafon's legacy or her own: nothing is fixed, or thought about. I suppose you don't mean to go off, and leave us to look after ourselves?'

He spoke irritably, feeling as if this announcement of Sarah's was the herald of a swarm of annoyances which were likely to come buzzing about his ears, and augured ill for future peace; and she treated his speech in feminine fashion, by proceeding as if she had not heard it.

'A miss like that, with no years to her back, and no head on her shoulders, I'll be bound, to come and put us all about! Even Jock, poor fellow, doesn't know what to make of it.'

Clement could not help smiling; for Sarah and Jock were natural enemies, and this new-born compassion had only sprung up since the old servant considered that a common foe had appeared upon the scene. He took no other notice; and Sarah's heart smote her when she saw how weary and troubled

he looked, and how the lines had deepened in his cheeks. Bitter enmity against poor Ursule appeared to her to be the most effectual manner of proving her devotion to her young master, and assuredly, if wishes could have carried Ursule back again to Dieppe, her own and Sarah's would have solved the difficulty of transport at once.

Clement did not go down again for the night. Ursule escaped to Madame d'Aurigny's room, lest her presence might be shutting him out from the drawing-room. The wind, which had been blowing all day in occasional violent gusts, had risen, by this time, to a hurricane; the rain dashed against the little windows, the roar of the sea came over the fields and marshes, and, to add to the noise, the rats evidently held high holiday between the old walls.

It was but a cheerless welcome to Ursule's English home!





## CHAPTER XIII.

### THE RECTORY AND ITS WORLD.

They used always to say, 'We and the world;' for they imagined themselves to be not only the half of the world, but also by far the better half. The duckling thought it was possible to be of a different opinion; but that the hen would not allow.—*The Ugly Duckling.*

**I**T has been said that Mr. Follaton—the rector of Elmwood, and the brother of Mrs. Clayton—was a widower. He had married, greatly to the surprise of his friends, who expected that he would end his days as Fellow of St. Peter's, instead of accepting the first living of which he was offered the refusal, and immediately proceeding to make his hopes and wishes known to the daughter of an old tutor. But, if he disappointed his friends' expectations, he made up for it afterwards by proving them to have been unmistakably right in their prognostications that the old life was better suited to him than the new.

When little apple-faced Rose was born, his wife died, and her sister had ever since that time lived at the Rectory—a kindly, soft-eyed woman, whose greatest difficulty lay in the power of decision, even upon the question of whether beef or mutton should furnish the daily dinner. For five years the care and

education of the five motherless children fell upon her ; but at the end of that time Mr. Follaton announced suddenly that Walter would be sent to Marlborough, and that he had engaged a governess for the girls.

His family had learned to receive announcements from him without surprise. He was of a singularly abstracted turn of mind, slow to perceive, and utterly impervious to a hint, taken up altogether with books and theological questions, disliking society, and almost childishly secure in his confidence that matters once rightly set in motion would go on as steadily as the wheels of the church clock at Elmwood, which kept the best time of any clock in the neighbourhood. When, however, his eyes were once opened to the necessity for change, the rector was too conscientious and true-minded to shut them again. He allowed the idea to revolve, slowly, it is true, but it must have been thoroughly, since, without any previous warning, his decision would be issued in a complete and final shape, against which there was no appeal. As has been said, after his wife's death, her sister lived with them at the Rectory—an arrangement which made Mr. Follaton very content, and five years passed away without the idea of change crossing his mind ; but, at the end of that time, another relation spent a few weeks there, made use of her eyes and ears during the visit, and mentioned her conclusions to Mr. Follaton in very plain terms. Responsibilities to which we do not grow, but are transplanted, are apt to weigh heavily ; and the care of these motherless children was fast wearing out Clare Villars, body and mind. She was so anxious about their right training, that she blamed herself for their faults as much as she blamed them, and it was pretty evident the strain was too great. What was to be the remedy ? The relation was a wise woman, and she suggested nothing ; she only

delivered herself of her opinions, and left the rector to watch and draw his conclusions—the result being, that within a month's time the changes took place that have been already mentioned.

Perhaps the household at the Rectory was more influenced than it knew by the soft, shrinking woman whom every one loved, and yet no one seemed to mind. She had taught herself painfully the routine of economic cares which were necessary, and nothing was easier than for the cook to prove her mistaken in any point she pleased; nevertheless, there was something in the perfect trust she placed in her servants' honesty, in the sorrowful look which saddened her whole face whenever anything was proved against them, which was not without its effect upon the most hardened. Certainly, as one of the number remarked, there was no pleasure in deceiving Miss Villars. And, although Clement smiled at his own fancy in supposing she could be of service, it was for her coming that, on the day following their arrival at Elmwood, he looked and longed impatiently.

Everything appeared to him to be in a singular transition state. For himself, he could not so much as read the newspaper with any degree of attention, his mind was in so restless and feverish a condition. The old familiar things looked strangely at him, as if aware they were no longer his. He avoided the rooms, lest Ursule should be in them: the touch of the stranger was over all. And the interview with his aunt must be gone through on this day: he should hear what she wished to do; he must prepare for wounded feeling and reproaches, and break gently to her what had not so much as crossed her mind. Sarah walked about the house dusting the chintzes in a reproachful manner, and continually expressing in her face that she had never expected such a blow to fall upon



her. It certainly was hard that he who was the chief sufferer should have everybody's burden to bear. 'Presently, I suppose,' said poor Clement, bitterly, 'I shall have to arrange who is to live here with that girl, and what she is to pay her cook and housemaid !'

Madame d'Aurigny did not come down-stairs. She made Ursule pull about the furniture in her room, and alter it to her liking ; and then she got up and dressed herself in a strange figured dressing-gown, and lay upon a little sofa at the foot of the bed, with all her grey curls arranged in order under her cap, in case visitors should come to see her, as she hoped with all her heart would be the case. Perhaps it was fortunate that she disliked Sarah, and pronounced her face too melancholy to be endured, since the old servant's good offices were not likely to be rendered with any alacrity. Madame was not unkind to Ursule. If she remained at the Cottage, as she reflected, it would be very desirable to have some one to pass away the time for her during her nephew's daily absences at Defforton ; and it would not do for Ursule to take it into her head to return to Dieppe—certainly not as yet, at all events. So she graciously permitted her to sit and talk over her first impressions of the place, and her wonder at there being nothing straight about the house, with its steps, and back staircases, and crooked passages.

'What is one to do, Madame?' she asked, a little hopelessly. 'At the farm-house there were cheeses to make.'

'Child, do not talk so imprudently ! Here you are to live the life of a lady, not of a farmer's daughter.'

'But ladies must do something,' persisted Ursule. 'Is it permitted to go to market?'

'I do not know. I imagine so—there can be nothing derogatory in that ; but I will ask my nephew. He has sent up to in-

quire at what hour I shall be visible, and I have fixed twelve o'clock.'

Poor Madame always said 'my nephew' with a sort of pride : it was very new to her to feel the ties of relationship.

'Ursule !'

'Madame ?'

'That picture opposite to me, over the fire-place, who is it ?'

'The old lady with the bright eye and grey hair ? Is it not a little like you ? It must be your sister.'

'Félicité ? Félicité like that ! Bah ! of what are you thinking ? Félicité was upright and smooth-skinned, with hair darker than yours. What foolishness to suppose that old woman to be Félicité, who was not so many years older than I am !'

'How should I know ?' said Ursule, soothingly. 'Very likely it is some relation of Monsieur Blunt's father.'

Madame did not answer ; but she watched the picture earnestly, with a wistful look upon her shrunken face, until she sighed and turned away her head. It was indeed a likeness of Madam Blunt ; but Ursule never heard her allude again to the subject. Presently she recommenced.

'Ursule !'

'Madame ?'

'What can be seen from my window ?'

'First of all the little garden, then the road, then fields and an orchard, and a bit of the railway, and the beautiful sea. Oh, there is a great deal !'

'A great deal, child ! What is there in all that ? I mean, what is there to see, to distract ? What passes in the road ?'

Ursule was obliged to confess that a cart and a flock of sheep were all that had come under her notice, and Madame sighed again.

'This England is very *triste*,' she said, shivering; then, suddenly brightening, told the girl that she might go, for she heard her nephew in the passage; and Ursule, guessing his errand, was only too ready to escape, and, tying a light hood over her head, ran out into the garden.

Madame greeted her nephew as warmly as if she had been left in solitude all the morning, which, it crossed his mind, had probably been the case. No one could have been more kind and gentle towards her than he. He felt the greatest pity for what she had been called upon to do, and as if he ought to think no sacrifice too great which could soften the trial to her. He spoke of his mother, of her desire to see her sister once more, so that her wishes became imperative; and he dwelt as long as he could upon this fact, which evidently gratified his aunt. And then he went on to touch upon Ursule—his mother's delight when her prompt conjecture proved to be true—her eagerness to see the girl—her strong anxiety to repay, in some measure, the debt of gratitude she owed to the old Lagets. Madame listened with attention.

'Well, my dear Clement, you will probably have no objection to her remaining here with us? My comfort requires some one; it would be a convenience to me, and a provision for her.'

'I am afraid,' said her nephew, gravely, 'that the arrangement of who shall live in this house does not depend upon either you or me. Mademoiselle Lafon is the sole person to be consulted.'

'Ursule?'

'Precisely so.'

'Clement,' said Madame d'Aurigny, nervously tapping the side of the sofa, 'you are talking riddles; and I hate riddles. What has Ursule to do with this house?'

‘It is her own.’

‘Her own? Bah! you are a droll—you jest!’

‘I am in no jesting humour. I repeat, the Cottage and, what is more, four thousand pounds were left by my mother to Ursule Lafon.’

‘Four thousand pounds!’

Clement nodded. Madame’s colour changed; but, to his amazement and relief, she broke into no invectives. It seemed as if, with her, Félicité’s will was not to be resisted—even in the grave. She received the news with a touch of quiet dignity which he had not expected, and for which he was really grateful. She was pleased to hear of her own legacy, and then said calmly,

‘After all, this will make no difference; we shall all be together here.’

‘Mademoiselle Ursule may have many words to say to such an arrangement.’

‘Nonsense! she is but a child; she must do what I bid her.’ A remembrance of the many times Ursule had resisted her attempts at authority rose up and troubled Madame at that moment. But things were different now, and she was far more amenable and gentle. Of course she would do as Madame directed. ‘Fetch her here,’ she said aloud: ‘all this can be settled at once.’

So Clement had to go in search of Ursule, whom he found in the garden, with her attention divided between a bunch of grapes and her little phrase-book. She looked reluctant to go in, when he explained that he had been sent to fetch her. ‘Is she angry?’ she asked, with the shrinking she felt whenever the idea crossed her mind that these things were actually her own.

‘Not at all,’ answered Clement; ‘but it seems to me that I ought to give you warning. My aunt may talk as if she considered it proper that you should yield your will to hers, and act in this matter in the manner she has decided to be best. Now, it is right that you should be perfectly uninfluenced, and I particularly desire that you should not hastily consent to arrangements of any kind whatever until you have consulted the trustees my mother appointed.’

‘Why, you are a lawyer yourself, Monsieur,’ said she, looking up with a smile. ‘I will leave everything in your hands.’

‘That is exactly what I do not wish you to do,’ he answered, with some irritation. ‘I am the last person who should have anything to do with the matter. I wish you to act entirely independently of my aunt and me.’

‘I wish——’ began Ursule, abruptly; then she paused, and went on hurriedly, ‘Do not think me ungrateful, Monsieur, for your mother’s goodness—I shall never cease to love her for it; but I cannot help wishing that she had not given your pretty house to me. If she had but sent me a message of friendship, and you or Madame had the rest——’

She looked in his face as she spoke, with an expression so beseeching and humble that his feelings were touched with a sense of past injustice. It shamed him to think that he was visiting his own vexation upon this innocent girl, herself almost unprotected in a land of strangers. It was not the loss of fortune or the value of the land that he begrudged—to all this she was welcome enough; it was the old home, the home of his boyhood, which he could not bear to think had passed out of his hands for ever; and it was the want of confidence which prevented his mother telling him of her intentions that galled him

most of all. When he answered Ursule, it was more kindly than he had ever spoken to her before.

‘I can quite understand,’ he said : ‘it must be a burden to you, and I am afraid none of us are very kind in trying to make it otherwise. But you will think differently by-and-bye ; and, believe me, it is well that you have independent persons to look after your interests. I will write a note to Mr. Gray or Mr. Ross, and ask one of them to come out from Defforton by an early train to-morrow. They are persons whom my mother altogether trusted.’

‘Thank you,’ in a grateful tone, was all that Ursule could say before they reached the door of Madame d’Aurigny’s room. But even there, with his hand on the lock, Mr. Blunt paused.

‘Remember,’ he said, ‘you must make no promises until you have seen Mr. Gray. You understand, do you not ?’

‘But yes, perfectly ;’ and they entered the room.

‘You have heard, Ursule ? I hope you are sufficiently alive to my sister’s bounty. It was, indeed, a fortunate thing for you that I inhabited the *premier* of the Sansons’ house,’ began Madame at once.

‘Yes, Madame,’ said Ursule, simply, though a little smile flickered about the corners of her mouth.

‘And I have done my best to instruct you to conduct yourself in a *comme-il-faut* manner.’

‘Yes, Madame.’

‘I shall still continue to instruct you. Of course, this will make no difference. You will reside here : there is nothing to take you back to France ; and I and my nephew shall reside with you.’

‘Of course, Madame.’

‘Stop !’ said Clement, eagerly ; ‘nothing of the sort must be

agreed upon. Ursule—Mademoiselle, you have already promised to engage yourself to nothing until you have taken advice.'

She looked at him with astonished eyes. 'You did not mean *that*!' she said. 'Why, it is simply a matter of course. What else could there be?'

'Hold your tongue, Clement,' said his aunt, for the first time speaking irritably to him. 'It is, as she says, a finished affair. Go away, and let me talk with Ursule.'

'Mademoiselle, I shall not permit you to bind yourself to any course of action. You are to consult your trustees.'

'Not upon Madame's living here?'

'Upon everything which concerns your arrangements.'

'Of what are you thinking, Monsieur!' exclaimed Ursule, indignantly, turning round with flashing eyes; 'of what do you believe me capable? Is it possible that I should have the baseness, the wickedness, to refuse a home to Madame, when it is her own sister who has put it into my power to offer it?'

'Wait, I say, until you have seen the trustees,' said Clement, pacing up and down the room with perturbed steps.

'I will not wait. Why should I wait? No one shall judge for me in such a matter as this. Madame,' continued Ursule, kneeling by her side, and taking the wasted hand in her own, 'you understand me better; you know that sooner—a thousand times sooner—than that you should go away from here, I would return to Dieppe, and not accept a *son* of this hateful money. I would far rather do so now,' said the girl, trembling with excitement, and looking angrily at Clement.

'You are a good girl, Ursule,' said Madame, touched by her warmth of tone, 'you have a good heart; and my nephew only speaks as these men always speak,' she added, contemptuously. 'Certainly, I will remain with you, and Clement also.'

‘No,’ said the latter, standing before the window and looking out; ‘my home will for the future be in Defforton. It must have been so, whoever had the Cottage,’ he said, as Madame d’Aurigny made an exclamation of remonstrance.

‘You are not going to separate yourself from me?’ she said, reproachfully.

‘My dear aunt, I must work, and that a little harder than I have hitherto done. I have lived here for my mother’s sake; now the time is come when I must throw myself into the business more completely. I am ready to offer you such a home as I can furnish in the town——’

‘It is impossible for me to move again,’ said Madame, with petulance.

‘Madame remains here,’ said Ursule, defiantly.

Clement glancing at her, half vexed and half amused at her persistency, was struck with the beauty of her face, consisting more in expression than in feature, and now lit up with the glow of warm feeling. Colour had flushed her brown cheek; her eye sparkled; she looked like a small heroine as she stood by Madame’s side, drawn up to her full height. He acknowledged to himself that he liked her all the better for her valour and constancy; and yet he was provoked at the failure of his precautions—at the notion that his aunt willingly allowed herself to be dependent upon her. But he smiled very kindly as he said,

‘You are a good friend, Mademoiselle Ursule!’

‘Bah! what a fuss you both make!’ said Madame. ‘There is nothing else to be done, that I can see; that is, provided I arrange to stay here. Still, Clement, I wish that you would reconsider your decision. It will be unbearably *triste* in this absolute country without you. Who are your neighbours—your society?’



‘There are my cousins at the Rectory—plenty of them ; there are Mr. and Mrs. Chambers, living at the Hall, about three quarters of a mile off ; there is the doctor, Mr. Ferguson, and the Miss Rosewardens, and—those are all I can think of just now.’

‘And in the town—this town you speak of ? But it is no use ; it is impossible for me to move : this pain in my back will drive me distracted.’

‘I wish I could do anything for you,’ said Clement, much concerned.

‘Nothing—nothing ! Ursule, can you not teach yourself to stand still ? Every movement goes through me.’

When these fits of nervous irritability came on, the more quiet she was kept the better. Clement stole out of the room, determined to bring Dr. Ferguson to the rescue before the day was over, and inclined, for the first time, to pity Ursule for the constant strain upon her forbearance.

‘I like her for speaking out heartily, just now,’ he thought to himself. ‘There must be some good in her. She can’t be utterly frivolous and selfish, or she would have been glad to have rid herself of the burden ; but no—she showed no signs of it, at all events. What on earth will become of her here ?’

When luncheon was announced, he sent notice to Ursule ; and Sarah returned, labouring with indignation at the difficulty of understanding what either said, but, as far as she could tell, the young Frenchwoman wanted to have her dinner up there with Madame. ‘Nasty foreign ways !’ formed her commentary.

In the afternoon came Miss Villars, Elsie, and with them, in spite of Clement’s injunction, Bella. Elsie walked in, looking shy and uncomfortable, until she had glanced round the room, and became aware that no enemy was there in the form of a

stranger. Bella's countenance, on the contrary, sank, when she had even more rapidly made the reconnoissance. She was a tall, womanly-looking girl, fair-haired and light-eyed ; but the eyes, though pretty in colour, were set too closely together for beauty, and there was, even to a casual observer, a want of the frank-hearted openness which proclaimed itself in her sister's face. To strangers, however, her manner was far more pleasing ; she was free from Anne's awkwardness and Elsie's brusquerie, and she possessed, to a rare degree, either tact or what passed for it in society.

Miss Villars was a tall, drooping, graceful-looking woman, with a sweet gentle smile and a shrinking, almost painful, nervousness of manner, which made her falter and hesitate when she so much as heard her own unsupported voice. She was one of those women whose hardest task it seems to be to stand alone in the world, obliged to decide and act upon their own responsibilities. In her case the care of the large household at the Rectory was a burden which only the most conscientious feeling of duty could have induced her to undertake. She had not the smallest love of power in her disposition. No one knew what it cost her to give a reprimand, and no offender suffered so much from the rebuke or dismissal as Miss Villars herself. And although, whatever the pain to herself, she was too right-minded to avoid what she had made up her mind it was her duty to do, she was also of so transparent and guileless a mind, so ready to believe good, so prompt with her own excuses for the offender, that many a wrong dealing was never brought to light, and many a sinner avoided punishment. Yet it was to her, with her ready sympathetic charity, that Clement, in the midst of his doubts and annoyances, turned with no little relief.

‘Thank you, with all my heart, for coming, Miss Villars.’

‘It must be terribly dreary for you,’ said she, holding out both hands to him, with her soft eyes full of tears.

‘It is all very strange. I scarcely know myself or the house. But I want to enlist your kindness on behalf of my two newcomers, who lie heavy on my mind. It has been a severe blow for my poor old aunt to leave her country at her time of life, and—to meet with this shock after all. Here she seems to be cast away; everything is strange—mode of life, food, people. I pity her with all my heart. I cannot see how she is to avoid being miserable. And she is in great suffering, to add to it all. Miss Villars, what is to be done?’

Clement smiled to himself, the instant he had put the question, at having supposed it possible for Miss Villars to give advice; and yet there was some degree of comfort in her ‘Poor thing, how very sad for her!’ because it said, plainly, how gladly she would help him, if she could.

‘There has been this complication about the house to increase our difficulties,’ he said, continuing to pour out his troubles: ‘I had thought that my aunt could live with me at Defforton; but she seems to think it impossible for her to undertake another remove, and I believe, indeed, that she is quite unfit for it.’

‘But,’ suggested Miss Villars, with hesitation, ‘surely it will be happier for Mademoiselle Lafon to keep Madame d’Aurigny with her—that is, supposing she lives at the Cottage.’

‘You think so, do you?’ asked Clement, eagerly.

‘I—I am no judge, but I should have thought so. She is very young, poor child, is she not?’

‘But do you think it right that she should undertake such a burden as the care of my aunt must be, when there is no real tie?’

‘It seems to me as if circumstances had formed the tie. And Madame d’Aurigny must have been very kind to her?’

‘Yes,’ said Clement, doubtfully. He was less sure of this fact than formerly.

‘Then she will like to do all she can to show her gratitude,’ said Miss Villars, warmly. ‘Having no mother, poor thing, it will be so pleasant for her to feel she is not quite alone.’

‘Mademoiselle Lafon is going to stay at Elmwood, is she not, Clement?’ asked Bella, who had pretended to be absorbed in looking through a photograph-book, but had not missed a single word of the conversation.

‘I believe so.’

‘I am very glad.’

‘I am very sorry,’ bluntly said Elsie, who had also heard everything, only took no pains to hide her interest.

‘Sorry! Elsie, my dear child!’ gently remonstrated Miss Villars.

‘Sorry! How unkind you are!’ This from Bella.

‘Yes, I am sorry,’ persisted Elsie. ‘I am certain we shall never suit; she will not like our ways, nor we hers. I dare say she will give herself airs and graces; but, whether she does or not, we don’t want new people. One never knows what to say to them.’

‘Elsie is thinking about her French genders,’ said Bella, excusingly.

‘Well, they do make it worse,’ her sister said, good-humouredly.

‘My dear——’ began Miss Villars; but she hesitated, and Bella broke in, in her quiet voice,

‘Do you like Mademoiselle Lafon, Clement?’

‘I?’ he answered, taken aback by the question. ‘I—I

hardly know her yet. Yes ; indeed, I think there is a great deal to like in her : she is behaving very well in this business.'

'I hope we shall see her.'

'Nonsense, Bella !' exclaimed Elsie. 'What is the use of worrying her now, when there will be a hundred other opportunities ?'

'But I want you to see her ; I want her to feel not utterly friendless,' said Clement. 'It seems to me that we have each our own affairs to look after, and she is the most desolate of all. Elsie, put those very fierce opinions of yours out of sight, if you please, or you will frighten her from Elmwood for ever. Miss Villars, will you come up-stairs and be introduced to my aunt ? Then Mademoiselle Lafon will probably consent to make acquaintance with Elsie and Bella.'

Miss Villars, with a heightened colour, followed him out of the room. The meeting with the old French lady was to her, if possible, a more formidable affair than it would have been to Elsie, and she felt far more unequal to the task of making herself understood in a strange language. Clement would have pitied her if he had known how her limbs trembled, and what an effort it was for her to follow him into the room where Madame d'Aurigny lay on the sofa in all the grandeur of her flowered dressing-gown ; and Ursule, sitting on the window-seat, read aloud in a monotonous voice, which she had proved to be the best way of soothing her in moments of irritation.

She stood quietly by while Madame was making an elaborate little speech to express the pleasure she felt at receiving a visit from Miss Villars. When her own turn came, the latter caught a wistful look as if she was pleading for kindness, and her good heart went out to the girl at once. But she was too shy to express anything ; she shook hands with her tremulously, and

then Clement asked Ursule to go into the drawing-room and entertain his cousins.

Two pair of eager eyes fastened themselves upon her as she came into the room, perfectly quiet and self-possessed, and ready, with French pliability, to adapt herself to those she came to see, although all the while in the background there was no little curiosity about the details of a life and society to which, even in her own country, she was a stranger. No one, however, could have failed to be daunted by the frigidity of Elsie's manner. It was not any intentional unkindness, in spite of what she had said before Clement, but it was a most unpleasant armour of prickly points which her shyness invariably presented to a stranger, heightened tenfold in the present case by the horror of being obliged to express herself in a strange language. Poor Ursule, finding an impenetrable barrier of '*Oui*' and '*Non*' the only replies she could elicit, began to wonder whether she was understood at all, whether English young ladies always sucked the handles of their parasols, as Bella was doing now, or whether it was not *comme il faut* to introduce topics of conversation. In spite of Elsie's pretty face, Bella looked the most hopeful of the two, or, at all events, the least inclined to get up and run away; but her utmost endeavours produced very little effect. She found it was of so little use to ask questions when the reply was exhausted in a monosyllable, that in despair she fell back upon a description of their sea-voyage and her own miseries, told in language so sparkling and bright that any one who followed her meaning could not have failed to be amused. But, although Elsie could have understood it well enough had she read it, she was too shy and bewildered to recognize the charm in Ursule's rapid language, and too honest to pretend, like Bella, that she derived any enjoyment from the

account. She sat, looking as uncomfortably icy as ever: while Bella, who was anxious to create a favourable impression, smiled and nodded, and even attempted longer answers, speaking correctly enough in all but accent, and encouraged by Ursule's ready perception of her meaning to plunge into bolder depths. Nothing could have been prettier, if Elsie only would have allowed it, than the tact and graciousness of the French manner; but partly a persistent contempt for anything foreign, partly a genuine horror of strangers, prevented her from admiring it, or giving way to the least cordiality. Only a wish to do as Clement desired, just at this time when he had much to trouble him, added to Anne's earnest entreaty that she might be spared the first introduction, induced her to accompany Miss Villars to the Cottage; and now she sat, looking the picture of misery, longing for the time of escape, and presenting no very encouraging prospect to poor Ursule as a specimen of the young English ladies with whom she must look forward to come into contact.

The conversation—if such it could be called—arrived at a depressing pitch. Having exhausted the voyage, there was very little remaining to Ursule. Home and the antipodes might have had more ideas in common than these girls, divided only by a narrow sea-channel and the difference of language. There seemed to be a void of anything to communicate; and Elsie could look nothing but hostile, as if Ursule were an interloper, and consequently an offender of the deepest dye.

Clement took in the position with a rapid and amused glance, when he brought Miss Villars down-stairs, and Elsie rose with delight that her penance was at an end. Ursule, on her part, watched with some amazement the girls' unreserved and frank manner with their cousin, and was grateful to Miss

Villars for the kindly way in which she took her hand and tried to frame a little speech of invitation to the Rectory. It was the first word of welcome she had received, and it brought the tears into her eyes. More than anything had this visit depressed her with its realization of all she had heard and read of English stiffness and coldness, and for the twentieth time she wished herself back in the little glazed room to be kissed and scolded by kind old Madame Sanson.

Mr. Blunt walked back to the Rectory with his cousins. Ursule put on her bonnet, and stole out of the house across the fields towards the sea. She thought it would seem like an old friend ; but whether it was fancy, or whether the state of the clouds made a difference, certain it was that it looked, as she pronounced it, cold and gloomy, and as unlike as possible to the big, blustering waves of her own Dieppe.







## CHAPTER XIV.

### SHUT OUT.

Hame, hame, hame, fain wad I be  
Hame, hame, hame, in my ain countrie.

SCOTCH SONG.



MR. GRAY came and went. He had a long consultation with Clement on his way from the station, and used his instructions by setting before Ursule, in the best French he could command, what would be her position, and what she undertook in her stanch invitation to Madame d'Aurigny. She listened politely, and was grateful to him for the pains he took to put everything clearly before her. But she never wavered in her determination. The house, and all that she had, were at Madame's service. That was the little phrase she repeated over and over again, rather proud of its comprehensiveness, and in no way shaken by all the arguments which the lawyer thought it necessary to bring forward. Clement could do no more than fix a certain sum to be paid towards Madame's maintenance, as much as he could afford in addition to a little of her own ; and Mr. Gray took his leave, wondering in no small degree how Ursule and Madame between them would

make their way in an atmosphere so entirely strange as the society at Elmwood.

Clement himself was glad to go. It was painful to him to remain in a house no longer his own, which yet could never seem otherwise. Then, with his aunt up-stairs, his presence necessarily deprived Ursule of a great deal of freedom: the household was divided into two, and discomfort was the result. Sarah had made up her mind to go with him to Defforton; and when she found that he would live in lodgings, and required no servant, her disappointment was bitter. Between the dislike of change and the misery of altogether forsaking the family, she determined to remain at the Cottage; and Ursule, impressed by Clement with an idea of her value, and supposing that disagreeable manners might be the distinctive character of all English servants, gladly accepted her service. Indeed, poor child, it was a relief at this time, whenever she could, to fall back upon doing what she was told. Never had she felt so desolate, so inexperienced. Clement knew not what to advise. He did not approve of Madame d'Aurigny's holding despotically the reins of power; he had a lurking fear that she might tyrannize over Ursule; at all events, it was placing the latter in a false position. But, then, the other alternative? Putting her eighteen years out of the question, the very routine of an English household was as different as anything well could be from the easy, informal life to which she had been accustomed. And Sarah would spare her nothing. Ursule had prudently resolved to accommodate herself entirely to the customs of the country; but it must be owned she tried hard to evade the necessity of sitting down to solitary meals, especially to the unknown institution of breakfast, with its elaborate comfort. She gave way, however, before Sarah's unflinching resolution that what had

always been should always be ; and while she took care that Madame d'Aurigny had her usual cup of coffee or chocolate in her bed—making it herself, indeed, until she discovered that Madam Blunt had tutored the old servant in its preparation after the foreign fashion—Ursule herself, with a sinking heart, descended into the gloomy dining-room, and submitted to her melancholy meal. The morning 'orders' were a heavy trial ; scarcely less so the result of the orders, in the joints which actually made her dread dinner, and the unfailing surety of hearing Madame descant in no measured terms upon the unsavouriness of her food. Ursule would have liked to run into the kitchen, and prepare little things herself ; but she dared not venture, while she feared to displease Mr. Blunt, by offending Sarah or the cook.

Sheer necessity was obliging her to make progress with English, so that she contrived to be understood. She committed, it is true, a hundred mistakes, some of them of consequence ; and Sarah had a grim satisfaction in insisting that each one should be brought to her notice. Ursule was young, and naturally buoyant-hearted. Sometimes the ludicrous side of her position struck her so prominently, that she would break into a peal of merry laughter. But it requires a large stock of philosophy to laugh very frequently when you must laugh alone.

Madame d'Aurigny's spirits were more than commonly variable. There were times, especially after a visit from Miss Villars or from Clement—who intended to make it a rule to devote his Saturday afternoons to the Cottage—when she was bright, and apparently happy. Fortunately, too, she liked her doctor, and gathered little morsels of local news from him, told in villanous French, but full of fascination to Madame. She was far beyond Ursule in her knowledge of the surrounding

neighbours. But, to compensate for these cheerful moments, there were long, long hours of pain and fretfulness, and bitter reproaches of Ursule for having not only dragged her to England, but induced her to remain. Sometimes the girl's patience gave way, and she answered angrily ; more often her gentleness did not fail until she had soothed the poor irritable invalid into calmness, or even into a tardy acknowledgment of her merits as a companion.

Perhaps an English girl in her position would have been more oppressed with the dread of offending against the laws of society than was Ursule. She felt utterly ignorant of them ; but she had too little self-consciousness to be troubled with fears of not acquitting herself fairly when the occasion came. Meanwhile, so little did she seek it, that she did not even think of returning the Rectory visit, until, one morning, Miss Villars, finding her sitting with Madame d'Aurigny, and pitying the pale face which told of some hours' confinement to the sick-room, entreated her to go there, and to desire the servant to show her into the young ladies' room at once.

If a griffin had suddenly been introduced by the housemaid, greater consternation could hardly have been produced ! The girls were reading with Miss Smith, the governess : Anne, stiff and awkward, her plain, good-tempered face knitted into an expression of weary, conscientious, unenjoyable study ; little Rose next to her, travelling through a copy, and rather entertaining herself with an accumulation of more and more oddly shaped blots ; Elsie sitting with both elbows on the table, her fingers twisted into her brown hair, her eyes riveted on the book, of which page after page was turned over without regard to the whereabouts of the reader, who happened to be Bella. It is true that, at this moment, it required patience to listen to

Bella with any amount of attention. She had been annoyed by a remark of gentle patient little Miss Smith, and gabbled on with a total disregard of sense, treating Carthaginians and Romans, friends and foes, alike, as no better than impediments in her steeple-chase career.

‘After some time had been spent in exercising the rowers on shipboard, the fleet put to sea, and went in quest of the enemy, the consul Duillius——’

‘My dear!’

‘It is Duillius, Miss Smith.’

‘But he was not the enemy.’

‘You did not let me finish the sentence.’

‘I don’t think you paid any attention to the stops. Do you not see that a sentence is concluded?’ said Miss Smith, timidly, and dreading an altercation with Bella.

‘One might be all day about it, if one waited to count four at every full stop!’

‘I like Rose to understand, and she cannot do so unless you read more carefully.’

‘Rose only spoils her copy when she attempts two things at once.’

‘Oh, pray, Bella, don’t begin to argue!’ said Elsie, impatiently. ‘Why can’t you just do what you are told?’

‘Miss Lafon,’ announced Hannah, the housemaid.

There was a general start of dismay. Elsie pushed back her chair; Bella composed her features into a smile; Rose allowed her pen to rest on the paper, and produce the finest round blot of the series, while she stared open-mouthed at the new-comer. Miss Smith rose, and Anne followed her example, looking, as she felt, more than usually wretched and ungainly. As for poor Ursule herself, she stood for a moment in the doorway reading

no welcome in any of the faces before her, and scarcely liking to advance further. But Miss Smith recovered herself sufficiently to put out her hand, and to go through the conventional greeting; and Ursule explained rapidly that she only obeyed Miss Villars in intruding upon them as she had done.

‘Poor thing!’ thought the governess, ‘she looks very young to be so lonely.’ For the only glimpse the Rectory party, as a body, had yet caught of her was in the high pew at St. Mary’s.

To come upon us in the morning! This is intolerable!’ was Elsie’s comment.

Anne felt her tongue glued to the roof of her mouth. It was very hard to be civil to people in English; in French it seemed an absolute impossibility. As for Bella, she, as usual, came to the rescue. She brought forward a chair, swept Rose’s inky copy-book out of sight, and plunged at once into the inquiry of how Ursule liked Elmwood. Elsie could understand her sister’s question better than the quick answer, but jealousy for Elmwood superiority made her do her best to gather its drift.

‘It is all strange to me, and a little sad, since poor Madame is so suffering. Without doubt, it must be a charming place,’ added Ursule, with national politeness.

‘Anne and Elsie think it the most beautiful spot in the world.’

‘And you also?’ Ursule asked, a little amused.

‘No, indeed. I like a place where there is something to see.’

‘Ah, I comprehend!’ was the eager answer. And then it came out, to Elsie’s great indignation, that Ursule thought there were too many trees at Elmwood, and that they made her feel oppressed and shut in.

That was the only thing wanting to fill up the measure of her

unpopularity. That a stranger, who could not even speak English, should venture to criticise the Elmwood trees was a height of presumption that was absolutely intolerable !

‘What does she come here for, if she knows no better than that?’ thought Elsie, fiercely.

‘The idea of poor Clément being obliged to give up his home for a foreigner!’ reflected Anne.

And yet they were not ill-natured girls. They would have been shocked willingly to inflict pain. They would have grudged no trouble for one of their own family or belongings. But they measured every one by their own standard. They lived so completely among themselves, that they had grown to believe that all outside the circle was inferior to it ; circumstances had never taught them to modify the harsh judgments which are especially the snare of the young. Taken individually, they were humble-minded about themselves, Anne and Elsie. They were aware of their own faults, and honestly tried to improve : as to accomplishments, although they were not very ready to acknowledge their necessity, they thoroughly understood themselves to be rather deficient than otherwise in each. But as a family—as Elmwood—they were invulnerable in their self-respect, and anything unknown and unproved was looked upon with suspicion and dislike. ‘What do I think of they new folks?’ old Betty Simmonds, who lived in the cottage next to the Rectory, had said. ‘I ’m not going to think nothing about them till I ’ve summered and wintered them.’ That was the Elmwood principle speaking out ; and it will be readily understood that poor Ursule’s chances of welcome were not many.

She sighed a little as she looked round upon the fresh young faces which had small kindness or sympathy in them for her. She would have so greatly liked to be friends with these girls,

to enjoy the companionship which was something new and bright to her; but she met with no encouragement, and she said to herself that she was the poor artist's daughter, and that they despised her. Only Bella was more friendly, and Bella's was the face she least cared for.

'You love flowers?' she ventured to say to Elsie in a low voice.

'Yes, a little,' answered Elsie, hesitatingly, and choosing the words because she was tolerably sure of them.

'Elsie is very fond of them,' interposed Miss Smith, glad to feel a safe subject introduced. 'She is our chief gardener. Do you ever work in a garden, Mademoiselle?'

'I?' answered Ursule, smiling. 'No. I did not know that I might. Do English ladies work in their gardens themselves?'

'Oh, yes; even Mrs. Chambers does so.' Mrs. Chambers was Bella's model; and, as Ursule looked uncomprehending, she explained, 'Mrs. Chambers at the Hall.'

'Ah, yes,' replied Ursule, trying to look interested.

'You must have seen her on Sunday, in the pew next to us, with the roses in her bonnet.'

'Carnations, Bella,' whispered the more correct Anne in English.

'I don't care; what does it matter? I don't recollect the French for 'carnations.''

As Ursule shook her head and looked bewildered, Miss Smith said, kindly,

'When do you mean to learn English?'

'Oh, I am learning it,' said the girl, eagerly. 'I am teaching myself as much as I can. I read it every day; but I am not sure when I am right, and I cannot understand Sarah. If I may, I will talk to you in English now.'



She looked smilingly round, as if pleading for indulgence ; but her first words sent Rose into a fit of laughter, which she tried to moderate by holding her hand over her mouth, but which very soon became uncontrollable. Ursule flushed a little as she saw a smile on the faces of the others ; however, she went bravely on, wondering, it must be confessed, at the strange manners which tolerated so much as a shadow of ridicule in such a case, still making a large-hearted allowance for what she supposed to be national customs. Miss Smith, a little uneasy for her pupils, and guessing her thoughts, inquired whether she had seen anything of the country as yet.

‘But no,’ said Ursule, eagerly ; ‘there is no one to show it me. I am alone, and it would not be—not be *convenable*,’ she said, hesitating, and unable to find an English word which expressed her meaning, ‘for me to make a *promenade* without some elder person, I suppose?’

‘I will walk with you some day, if you like,’ said Bella.

‘Oh, I thank you very much ; that is very good. But who will go with us?’

‘If you are afraid,’ said Anne, making a great effort, and looking at the wall as she spoke, ‘I will go also.’

Ursule’s ‘Thank you’ was warm, but her doubts were evidently not removed ; and Miss Smith, knowing rather more of French customs, said,

‘The girls walk about Elmwood alone, in a way which, I dare say, will seem strange to you at first ; but you will grow independent in time, and find that every one knows you, and that you need have no fears.’

Ursule’s answer was in rapid French. She had been independent herself in Dieppe, she said ; but then that was owing to her position. If she had been a *demoiselle*, she must have be-

haved very differently. There she had been obliged to go out—obliged to act for herself; but here in England she had thought that she must conform to society, to give up the solitary rambles in which she evidently delighted. It was plain that Madame d'Aurigny had lectured her severely upon her duties in these respects. Was it really possible that she might go out of the garden alone? Except just to come to the Rectory that morning, her church-going on Sunday, and that one stolen run to the sea, she had not dared to venture beyond the Cottage precincts; and, in fact, there was no doubt that she was preparing herself to live a sort of prison existence, which she dreaded, but believed to be unavoidable. It was all told so simply and humbly that Miss Smith, who alone perhaps understood the whole, felt her heart warm to the poor friendless girl.

'I am sure that Madame d'Aurigny will not wish to keep you in,' she said, quite energetically for her, 'when you tell her that Mr. Follaton allows his daughters perfect freedom in walking about, and that it is the same with all the families round. Indeed, if she does not believe me, you can ask Mr. Blunt.'

Ursule's face brightened. 'That is charming; I think, if I can get to the sea, I shall never be lonely.'

'And the lanes,' broke in Bella—'the Elmwood lanes are beautiful: everybody says so. Only they are horribly muddy, and covered with dead leaves just now. Nobody but Elsie goes into them while they are in this state.'

'I am not afraid of a little mud,' retorted Elsie.

'Mrs. Chambers says she does not like to see young ladies looking like plough-boys.'

'Well, it is quite sufficient if one of the family models herself upon Mrs. Chambers's principles,' began Elsie, loftily. But she did not finish her little speech. On the contrary, she said, in

a low voice to her sister, 'I beg your pardon, Bella ; I believe I am very cross.'

Bella looked exceedingly complacent after this. Ursule had not understood it ; but she noticed the sharp tone in the sisters' voices, and wondered whether the familiar uncourteous manner was common between members of English families. At all events, she thought it prudent to rise to go ; and Miss Smith, who had been exhorting herself into the necessary state of courageousness, ventured to suggest, in spite of horrified looks from both Anne and Elsie, that she was sure Miss Villars would be pleased if Mademoiselle Lafon would join the Rectory morning readings, as the arrangement would be likely to prove of service to both French and English scholars.

Ursule did not immediately answer. She looked and felt very grateful to Miss Smith ; but her intuition was not at fault with regard to the amount of welcome she would meet with from the others. It would have chilled her more if she had not set their frigidity down to the bare fact of their being English girls, therefore, she supposed, bound to act in this ungenial manner. She supposed it was to be overcome ; still, before she entered upon the task, she felt as if she must reflect. All her usual impulsiveness seemed to have forsaken her, and she said she would let Miss Smith know. The instant she had left the room, there was a general outcry.

'Oh, Miss Smith !'

'How could you !'

'Is she to be fastened upon us ?'

'Miss Smith, I shan't have to talk French, shall I ?'

'Oh, it is dreadful ! horrible ! I never knew you could be so disagreeable,' said Elsie, giving the governess a hug, to make up for her words, but looking the picture of rueful dismay.

‘We shall never get on with her ; she is different from any one else. Anne hates it as much as anybody.’

‘It will spoil all our mornings,’ Anne responded in a melancholy tone of voice. ‘I suppose we ought to do it. But her manner is so funny, I don’t understand it ; and I thought she pretended to be interested in things about which she could not really care. It did not seem quite straightforward.’

If any one had been at hand to point out the distinction between courtesy and insincerity, it would have been a useful lesson for the girls ; but Miss Smith, although she felt something of the truth, was not ready in just those little explanations which were often peculiarly needed, and she allowed the impression to remain. Perhaps it hurt Bella chiefly, as, after a moment’s thought, she said,

‘If it is not straightforward, it is very nice and pleasant.’

‘Oh, dear !’ reflected Elsie, ‘she will be a very bad companion for Bella. I must try and laugh her out of any sudden intimacy. Is this Mademoiselle Lafon to be your newest and dearest friend, Bella?’ she said aloud.

‘That does not matter to you,’ said her sister, angrily.

‘What will Mrs. Chambers say?’

‘Mrs. Chambers ! As if this girl would interfere with her ! Why, by her own confession, she is nobody.’

‘Then I can’t understand why you like her so much.’

‘I don’t like her.’

‘You let her fancy that you do : you offer to walk with her, at all events.’

‘What nonsense, Elsie ! As if one must mean exactly all that one says to people !’

‘Elsie—Bella !’ began Miss Smith, nervously, ‘the reading was not finished. Rose, my dear, fetch your copy. We must

not really talk any more about Mademoiselle Lafon ; only I am sure it will be a great advantage to you all if she will read French with us. I shall be thankful for the help, myself.'

Bella yawned. 'Never mind about those stupid Carthaginians, Miss Smith. I hear Aunt Clare's step in the passage.'

She was greeted by Elsie's exclamation—

'It was too bad of you to send that French girl up here, Aunt Clare ! And only think ! Miss Smith has entrapped us into speaking French every morning by asking her to come and read.'

'I am very glad, I am indeed. My dear, it is so terribly lonely for her, with only that poor Madame d'Aurigny for a companion ; and I was sure that you would like her, and be glad of a new friend.'

'Why does she not go back to Dieppe?' said Elsie, perversely. 'Just fancy, she is afraid to walk about our roads by herself !'

'Poor child ! She does not know our ways ; she is very young.'

'Nearly as old as Anne. Anne, speak !'

Anne lifted her head from the book which she was studying laboriously, and smiled back in return for her sister's bright loving look. But she only shook her head.

'There, Aunt Clare, it is all your fault, and you must go away. Anne says that we are idling and wasting our time disgracefully. But, you see, French invasions don't agree with Britannie constitutions ; and I, for one, don't mean to run counter to my forefathers. Now, Bella, quick ! Pick up that unfortunate Duillius, and rehearse his deeds.'

If Ursule, walking quickly home, could have looked back into the Rectory school-room, she would have been fairly puzzled at

the difference between Elsie in her shy frigid society mood, and Elsie at her ease, warm-hearted, affectionate, and bright. With a sigh, she relinquished her girlish hopeful visions of the pleasant intercourse which she had ventured to dream of as possible. There was a wall between herself and all of them, except perhaps Bella, who had shown some cordiality ; the same sort of wall as she felt also in speaking to Clement—a cold shade which enveloped everybody. She looked round her with a little shiver. November was close at hand, and Elsie's trees were sending down showers of yellow leaves into the thick red mud below ; the air was chilly and damp ; over everything was the touch of decay. She had never felt it so before. Not that autumn did not come in even more coldly at Dieppe ; but, because the air was keen and dry, the cold seemed fresh and invigorating ; and there were no leaves to flutter dismally about, but bright colours in place of the English drabs and browns in their cheerless monotony, and shrill merry voices in the air. Could she bear it ? Should she leave Madame there, with Sarah to take care of her, and her nephew to visit her occasionally, and go back herself—back to the dear old house, back to the Sansons, back to *him* ? A great yearning for it rose in her heart. Why should she stay ? She owed nothing really to Madame d'Aurigny ; she was not bound to her by any ties of blood ; she was miserable, wretched here. She longed to feel kind old Madame's arms about her neck, and to hear her little scream of welcome. She felt as if this England would freeze all the warmth out of her, body and heart. Why should she endure it ? Her face changed and hardened into determination, she walked resolutely into the Cottage, up the stairs, into Madame d'Aurigny's room ; she would tell her that she was welcome to live on at the Cottage, but that, for herself, she must go back to the old faces, the

friendly shores : she would not consent to live as a stranger all her life. The words of her little speech rose to her lips as she entered the room.

‘Ursule, is that you ? Are you come at last ?’ said the weary voice.

‘Dear Madame, you have not wanted me, surely ? I left Mademoiselle Villars here, and she passed me on the road returning.’

‘Oh, that woman ! She is so feeble, so small in her ideas, it is impossible to converse with her ; besides that, I am in great pain—such pain, child ! It does me good to hear your step. Everything is strange. For you, it matters little—you can go about, can have variety and distraction ; but for me ! Ah, it is very sad to be in a strange land !’

‘Dear Madame !’ faltered Ursule. How was it possible for her to inflict the blow she had been preparing ? How could she tell her that she, too, meant to desert her ? If Madame had known all that had just passed through the girl’s mind, she could have adopted no better course in order to shake the newly formed resolution.

‘Here, you seem to me to be my own child, the only thing left to me. As to Clement, he is very well ; but he is a man, he has his own occupations—one must not expect too much. I do not complain : you know it is contrary to my nature. I do not wish you to stay here in this room with me always : I prefer your taking the air occasionally, and coming back refreshed. But it is terribly lonely for me when you are away. I sometimes wish,’ continued the poor invalid, sighing, ‘that I had so much as Madame Sanson’s face to regard. She was not *comme il faut*, but she was worthy.’

Ursule’s whole face had brightened. ‘Then you like me a

little morsel after all, Madame?' she said, with a pretty caressing gesture.

'Yes, *petite*; I cannot spare you.'

'I will not go, Madame; I promise it,' she said, gravely. For the words contained a larger pledge than Madame d'Aurigny imagined, and, in making it, she put aside all those wishes which a few minutes before seemed irresistible. She gave up her country and her friends; she accepted the entire charge of Madame, with her weakness, and her crossness, and her variability; she bound herself to long hours of nursing and thankless care: but she felt as if those few words of affection, those signs of dependence, were enough to reconcile her to all. 'If only she loves me, I can do it;' and from her heart, that moment, Ursule sent up an earnest prayer that she might be blessed in the work she had undertaken, and taught how best to fulfil her duty. All her dissatisfied feelings fled. She had felt, poor child, as if she was driven to stand alone in the world—as if no one would so much as lend her a support; but if there was one who, as Madame said, listened for her step and cared whether she was in the room, everything, it seemed to her, would be endurable. Her spirits went up; she danced merrily about the room, made fun of her visit to the Rectory, and actually mimicked Anne and Elsie's shy manner and *mauvaise honte*. Madame forgot her pain in watching her, was gracious—even affectionate; and the day closed a great deal more brightly than it began.

The day closed, and another came, and the weeks followed each other; and Ursule lived what seemed a monotonous, cheerless life, but she did not once repent of her decision. True, Madame's complaints were continual; true, very rarely did she show the smallest symptom of affection; true, when Clement was there, Ursule was treated with indifference: in



spite of all, the girl saw that she was necessary to her comfort, and that without her the poor, feeble, suffering woman would have been doubly desolate. For the rest, her spirits were buoyant, and she managed to extract a good deal of self-amusement out of her position. She was a proprietress, and began to taste the sweets of ownership. She very soon picked up enough English to make herself understood. It was an unfavourable time of the year for gardening ; but she was seized with a great desire to distinguish herself in that pursuit, and old Thomas, the gardener, who came once a week for a day's labour, was soon won over by her pretty ways to a half-wondering, half-affectionate admiration, blended with an extraordinary contempt for her foreign notions.

'From what I can see,' he confided to his wife, 'they mostly lives upon green food. It stands to reason there's a time for salads, like there be for other things ; and Madam Blunt knew it, and didn't ax for cos-lettuces in winter : but this young thing, her's always driving at me to send 'em in for the old lady, and wanting all sorts of outlandish rubbish to mix up with 'em. Well, she's but young, and I sim I must do what I can for her.'

By degrees, this was what all those who had anything to do with Ursule began to feel—with one exception. The exception was Sarah. She felt as if her rigid honesty and economy gave her a right to be as disagreeable as she pleased ; and exceedingly disagreeable she contrived, beyond a doubt, to make herself. She pretended to be unable to understand her young mistress ; she delighted in convicting her in an error ; on many occasions she flatly disobeyed her orders, on the plea that they were not such as she had been accustomed to receive ; and, what was worse, she encouraged the niece who



*Ursule and the Gardener.*



was under her to treat Ursule's directions with the same contempt. She really did despise Ursule; she did not believe she would have the courage to find fault. Once or twice, to be sure, she had caught a glance of her eye which staggered her for a moment, but nothing more; and Sarah resolved that, as it was her evil fate to submit to the nominal rule of a young girl, she would take care that the rule was but nominal, and that the real government of the house should rest with her.

Ursule was shrewd, and she had no difficulty in understanding Sarah's tactics, but much in determining how to meet them. She was hardly aware of the value of the old servant, for her virtues were such as are more frequently met with in France than England; and she was quite alive to her faults. Consequently, as far as she was concerned, she would have been quite ready to part with her, and, indeed, would have considered it a relief. But what would Clement say? He had an affection for the old woman, and had impressed upon Ursule her good fortune in securing her services: he had expressed himself indebted to her for her care of his mother. She did not feel as if she could venture to run counter to his wishes, and yet she was anything but satisfied with her own position. At last, one day, there arrived a crisis.

Madame d'Aurigny had been more than usually suffering, and Ursule had passed all the morning in her room. In the afternoon she promised herself a treat—a run to the sea with Jock, who had been left at the Cottage by his master, and had become her fastest friend; and, accordingly, when the bell was answered by the girl Bessy, she desired her to let the dog out of the yard into the garden. Jock's first rush on these occasions was to the windows, to give notice of his readiness for a start;

and she waited, until she began to wonder at the delay, for his well-known yelp of impatient delight. At last she rang the bell again, to inquire whether he had been let out, and was told with much pertness by Betty that she was waiting until she had finished doing what Sarah had put her to. The moment the girl had said it, and glanced in Ursule's face, she repented. Ursule's eyes flashed fire, and only by a strong effort could she control herself to say, slowly and distinctly,

'I do not think you remember who I am : I do not think you have ever understood that you are to obey me first of all. Understand it now, if you please, or you cannot remain in my service.'

Half frightened, half indignant, Bessy muttered something about leaving.

'Certainly : I will arrange with your aunt when that shall be. Be good enough to go and let out the dog.'

Instead of Jock, came Sarah in a fury of indignation to know what Miss Lafon meant by dismissing her niece. She was not accustomed to such doings, and would like to know what was intended by them.

'It means,' said Ursule, still restraining her natural inclination to volubility, and speaking very quietly, 'that I expect to be treated in future with respect. Both Madame d'Aurigny and I have reason to complain of the manner in which you refuse to attend to our wishes ; and however much we might regret to be obliged to dismiss you after your long service with Madame Blunt, we shall be forced to decide upon doing so unless you can make up your mind to behave differently.'

Ursule's heart beat ; but she had conquered. Whether the gravity and dignity of her little speech overawed Sarah, or whether conscience aided her in the pricks it administered, it is

certain that Sarah was dumbfounded. She looked at Ursule in astonishment, and then fairly retreated, with no other manifestation of hostility than a slam of the door. In another minute Jock, in an ecstasy of delight, was barking outside the window; and Ursule, smiling to herself at her own valour, left her dignity at the Cottage and ran off across the meadows to the sea.

Instead of leaving, Bessy apologised. She was not a bad sort of girl on the whole, and her spirit of insubordination was the result of her aunt's constant fault-finding with the newcomers. She looked so awe-struck and frightened for a few days, that Ursule reproached herself with her own severity, and would perhaps have spoiled its effect with a little over-kindness, if Bessy had not kept out of the way. Altogether, as the winter days drew on, the household fell into order. Madame d'Aurigny never quitted her room; Ursule sat with her, employing herself happily in endless ways, adapting herself with French pliancy to the circumstances of her new life, and becoming bolder in the length of her solitary rambles with Jock. She declined the regular readings at the Rectory, to the Follatons' great relief, but once now and then joined in them. Anne and Elsie believed themselves absolved from further civilities; Miss Villars could never press a subject; and when Clement found either of his cousins at the Cottage, that one was invariably Bella—a circumstance which did not impress him favourably with Ursule's discernment.

Sometimes—not very often—he stayed from Saturday till Monday at Elmwood, and then she had a companion in the great high pew, in a corner of which she used to sit and wonder at the unwieldy monuments which protruded from the walls, the dead taking up so much room that there was scarcely enough

left for the living. Before she knew the language sufficiently well to be able to follow Mr. Follaton in his polished, laboriously put together sermon, she found herself spelling out the old inscriptions which commemorated the Urbanity and chearful Benevolence of the best of men or women, stuck up in old, dusty, disfigured corners, not without a certain pathos in their ancient griminess—in the cobwebs, which stretched across from one tale of virtues to another—in their pitiful stories of the young snatched away—the young, who would have been so very old by this time, had they lived. St. Mary's was a beautiful, disfigured church, which had never been restored. Side by side with lumbering erections of the present century, sprang noble arches, grey and solemn ; and nothing could exceed the beauty of the lines of the north windows, through which Ursule watched the waving elms and the flickering shadows of their branches. Very soon she began to love the old church. A quiet repose about it was unlike her own nature, and all the more dear. She liked to go there directly the bell began, passing old Thomas, her gardener, who was one of the bell-ringers, with a friendly nod, and going swiftly up the aisle to her pew. The old men at the west end chattered and laughed in undertones ; the elm branches outside swayed backwards and forwards ; a little robin or two often came and sang glad little songs of praise. Ursule felt as if those quiet moments prepared her for the service that was coming ; and, perhaps, it was at these times when any one who had known and cared for her would have been most struck with the change which was growing over her face, altering its wayward wilfulness of expression into a sweet steadfastness.



## CHAPTER XV.

### THE THREE SISTERS.

Let me not dwell so much within  
My bounded heart.

A. L. WARING.

**N**OVEMBER was rather a busy month in the Elmwood year. There were certain old-established charities which held high days about this time : the blanket-lending, preceded by a grand marking at the Rectory ; and the clothing-club sale, when the school-house was transmogrified into a great shop, and all the available ladies of the parish turned themselves into shop-women for two days, and sold countless yards of flannel and calico to the parishioners. In spite of the trouble and fatigue, the girls considered it very good fun. There was a pleasant bustle and excitement about the arrival of the great waggon, with its bales of goods, and the fitting-up the school-room with temporary counters, and arranging all that was wanted behind it. Anne was the most busy ; and she came home a perfect mass of white fluff and dust, so that there was a cry of amazement at her appearance.

‘Am I so bad ?’ said she, good-humouredly. ‘Never mind ; it will all brush off.’



‘Is everything ready?’ asked Miss Villars

‘Everything that really matters. The things have all arrived, and we have stowed them away as well as we can ; but Elsie is staying behind, because she fancies she might make the room look prettier.’

‘Has she any one with her?’

‘Yes. Mrs. Chambers was driving by in the pony carriage, and came in to see what was doing. Elsie persuaded her to stop ; for it is just the sort of thing she understands so well.’

‘I think I will go down and help them,’ said Bella, getting up quickly.

‘My dear, you said you were so tired!’

‘Oh, I am quite rested now. And they must want more hands.’

‘That is very kind of you, my dear,’ said Miss Villars, unsuspectingly, while Anne looked uncomfortable. ‘Still I really don’t like your tiring yourself out so thoroughly. I am sure you said you had a headache.’

‘Yes, but it is better ; and I should not like to leave it all to them,’ explained Bella, wishing to appear self-denying while she had her own way.

‘Here is Miss Lafon!’ said little Rose, popping her head into the drawing-room, and retreating again, according to her sisters’ practice of avoiding visitors. Anne tried to follow, but only met Ursule in the doorway, and became doubly embarrassed ; while Ursule, herself quiet and self-composed, stood aside to let her pass, and, finding her unresolved what to do, put out her hand, and saying, ‘Do not let me detain you—I have only a message for Miss Villars,’ walked into the room.

‘A message for me?’ said Miss Villars, overhearing the words, and coming forward.

‘Mr. Blunt is here,’ was Ursule’s answer. Then, in explanation, she went on, ‘He came this morning to shoot with those gentlemen—Mr. Chambers, I think, is one—and he only called at the Cottage, in passing, to see Madame d’Aurigny for a moment; but he desired that you might be asked to send a box to the station for him. He said you would comprehend.’

‘I do not know whom I can send,’ said Miss Villars, in a perplexed tone. ‘Every one is busy about the clothing-club. Bella, who can go?’

‘Tom, I suppose.’

‘No; I sent Tom to Bircham. Dear me, it is very awkward.’

‘Let me take it,’ said Ursule, pleasantly.

‘No, indeed; it is very kind of you to think of such a thing, but quite out of the question. There is the box by the window; you see it is too large for you to carry.’

‘There is a picture inside it,’ said Bella. ‘Come and look at it: the lid is not fastened.’

Miss Villars nodded contentedly in answer to Ursule’s ‘May I?’ and she looked into the box, while Bella unfastened the front, and took out one or two layers of silver paper.

But at the first glance the colour rushed into her face, and tears filled her eyes. It was her father’s painting of the gathering storm—the favourite picture about which brother and sister used to invent stories, wild and weird, of shipwrecked sailors and sunken rocks, and the vast dark solitudes under the great seas, in which neither fish nor plant can live—the picture which Mr. Blunt carried away with him. Ursule had often thought of it; she had sought about the cottage rooms with the hope of finding it in some corner, but unsuccessfully, and here it met her unprepared. Quiet Miss Villars, looking at her for some word of admiration, was horrified to see the look of intense yearning

sorrow in her eyes—the greedy expression with which they seemed to fasten upon the picture—the locking together of her hands with an almost convulsive clasp. ‘My dear!’ she said; ‘my dear!’

Ursule turned round with a start. ‘Do you think I might have it again?’ she said, eagerly, her eyes brimming over with great tears.

Miss Villars was too much bewildered to answer. She looked helplessly at Bella, who was curiously watching, and took up the word.

‘Have it again? What do you mean? It is Clement Blunt’s picture, you know.’

‘Ah, I know. *C’est juste*,’ said Ursule, recovering herself. ‘It was painted by my father, and—and—I beg your pardon,’ she added, feeling it impossible just then to speak of Louis.

‘Oh!’ said Miss Villars, taking her hand kindly, ‘I am so sorry we showed it to you so thoughtlessly. Clement told us he had bought it abroad; but I had no idea it was from your father. I am sure it is a painting any one may be proud of. Oh dear, how sorry I am!’

Ursule could not help smiling through her tears. ‘You do not know how glad I am to see it again. It is like a piece of our home. Thank you, with all my heart.’

She looked longingly at it as Bella replaced the coverings, but did not again repeat her desire, and turned to go away when she found that Miss Villars’s distress still continued.

‘I am coming part of the way with you,’ announced Bella.

No.—Pray, Miss Lafon, do persuade her not to go; she is not strong, and she said just now that she had a headache; but Elsie is still at the school-room, trying to arrange

things for to-morrow, and she thinks she must go again to help her.'

'Do you want so much to go?' asked Ursule.

'No,' said Bella, doubtfully; then more boldly, 'No. But it would be very unkind not to help Elsie.'

Ursule meditated for a moment. She had little desire to undertake the task, yet she was touched by Miss Villars's kind manner towards her just now, and wished to spare her anxiety.

'If that is all, and if you think I can be of any use, I will go there—only to save Bella,' she said, hesitatingly.

Miss Villars's gratitude was great; and Bella had no choice but to submit, although with a very bad grace, as she took care to show directly Ursule was out of hearing, by a prediction, which had at least the effect of making her aunt uncomfortable, that both Elsie and Mrs. Chambers would wish the new-comer anywhere but in the midst of their labours.

Ursule had entirely relinquished the hope of being on friendly terms with the Rectory family. As she walked along now, she could not help thinking with a little contempt of their unformed manners and Anne's especially ungainly ways, wondering at the self-concentration which seemed to enwrap itself contentedly in Elmwood and its affairs, and to stand so stiffly on its own ground that it would scarcely so much as recognize any other. Their worst sides had been shown to her; and even in their relations to one another, what she saw seemed more brusque and unceremonious than affectionate, and totally unlike any type of family life which she had ever before conceived.

Elsie and Mrs. Chambers were standing in the middle of the school-room when Ursule reached the door, rather inclined to despair over the general want of effect, and to feel as if their efforts had ended in failure. Mrs. Chambers was a pleasant-

faced little woman, fashionably dressed, brisk, and decided. She knew Ursule only by sight, and was a little curious to see what she was like ; so that Elsie's hesitating invitation to enter was taken out of her mouth, and made most cordial by the change of speaker, while Mrs. Chambers forestalled Ursule's offer by begging her to give them the benefit of her taste in making a better arrangement of their uninviting materials. To add to the charm, it was all said in the purest French ; and Ursule, with brightening eyes, thought her delightful, and plunged at once with keen interest into the affair. It was curious to see how rapidly she produced an effect—how the homeliest stuffs seemed to grow picturesque by a little judicious contrast and French touches of taste ; so that Elsie, looking on, acknowledged warmly how much she had done for them ; and as to Mrs. Chambers, she was enthusiastic in her thanks and her admiration. Ursule's piquante face and naturally graceful manners won her heart at once. She was inclined to blame Elsie for not having introduced Mademoiselle Lafon to her before, and prompt in her assurance of not allowing the acquaintance to drop.

Elsie also felt grateful for the first time to the new-comer. A keen delight in anything that was pretty made her appreciate Ursule's taste, and she praised it heartily after she reached home, and related Mrs. Chambers's admiration without a shadow of unworthy jealousy. Anne listened quietly, glad that her sister was pleased, although she thought the appearance was of very little consequence, so long as the women had the things they wanted for their money ; and was a little afraid that the effect of the picturesque arrangement might have spoiled her own plans for the different materials being at hand directly they were wanted. Bella looked up, and said contemptuously,

‘What a fuss you make about trifles, Elsie! One would suppose that Ursule’s just going in for five minutes had done wonderful things!’

‘You will see that it looks a great deal better this year than it has ever done before.’

‘Any new person coming in can arrange things differently.’

‘Well,’ said Elsie, good-humouredly, ‘you believe in Mrs. Chambers, you know, Bella, and she said that, until she saw it, she could not have supposed it possible to make so much out of so little. That’s all I know.’

‘Did she speak to Ursule, then?’

‘Oh, she has gone wild about her. She thinks her pretty, and graceful, and clever, and I don’t know what.’

‘Just seeing her in that way!’ said Bella, disparagingly. ‘I suppose you took care to tell Mrs. Chambers who she was?’

‘Not I. Why, what should I tell?’

‘I don’t think it is at all fair for Mrs. Chambers to think she is a lady, and all that. She is nothing but a common painter’s daughter; and I am sure people won’t like to associate with her without knowing. You ought to have said that.’

Elsie looked in amazement at her sister, and said, more gently than usual, ‘Oh, Bella!’

‘Well?’

‘You would not be so ungenerous?’

‘It is not being ungenerous: it is the truth.’

‘It is not our business to say, without being asked. Besides, I thought you were more her friend than any of us, and that you would be delighted to hear that she was liked.’

‘Well, never mind!’ said Bella, crossly. ‘I only say I think it is very unfair upon Mrs. Chambers, and you and Anne never understand her.’

It was an accusation at which Elsie could only smile ; but she said no more on the subject, and asked Anne for Miss Villars.

‘Clement has been down for a day’s shooting, and sent a message to desire that his picture might meet him at the station. There was only little Bob Coombes available, and Aunt Clare did not altogether like trusting him ; so she and Rose have started off as a sort of rear-guard. Of course, he goes back by the 5.10 train.’

‘My dear old Anne, even in the dark I can see you look dreadfully tired and dusty.’

‘Dusty, am I ? I thought I was presentable.

‘No, you are not. There !’ giving her collar a pull, ‘and there !’ smoothing her hair, ‘and there !’ taking her face in her hands, and giving her a kiss. ‘Now, come away up-stairs, and be tidied.’

‘Oh, Nell !’ Nevertheless Anne submitted, it being a tolerably fixed law in her mind that Elsie should have her own way, although her own views of adornment and her sister’s varied very considerably.

Miss Villars and Rose, meanwhile—the latter in high spirits over the darkness and the damp, which gave rather an adventurous air to the expedition—walked briskly up and down the platform, keeping Bob Coombes and his charge in view, and waiting for Clement, who came in at last, very wet and muddy, having just had time to leave a brace of pheasants at the Cottage on his way. He could talk at first of nothing but their good sport, then, recollecting, caught himself up with,

‘I beg your pardon. Do you mean that you have come here this cold evening on purpose to secure the safe delivery of the picture ?’

‘Well, it was not a good day for anything reaching its desti-

nation,' said Miss Villars, laughing, 'so I thought I had better see to this myself.'

'Indeed, I did not think of inflicting the labour upon you. Thank you, excessively: you know that I prize it.'

'Yes; but you did not tell us that the painter was Mademoiselle Lafon's father. I am afraid I gave the poor girl a sad shock to-day, by showing it to her. I was quite unconscious.'

'Never mind,' said Clement, carelessly; I imagine she will easily recover from it. Besides, why should it shock her? Her father is alive and well, though, from what I gathered, I dare say he may be a bit of a scoundrel, and she need not faint because she sees one of his pictures.'

'I am sure that she felt it a good deal, from some reason or other,' answered Miss Villars, with unusual persistency.

'Possibly, then—though I don't see why. But, on the whole, how does she get on? How do you like her? Rose doesn't hear: she is taken up with balancing her large self upon the weighing-machine. How do you all like her?' repeated Clement.

'I don't know,' said she, with a little sigh.

'She ought to be happy,' said Mr. Blunt, quickly. 'There are the girls, plenty of them and near at hand, to make it pleasant.'

There was a little irritation in his tone, as if he was trying to assert a doubtful fact; but Miss Villars did not perceive it, and answered 'Yes,' doubtfully, because she did not know what else to say.

'She will get used to things by-and-bye,' persisted her companion. 'You think she is kind to my poor aunt?'

'Oh, yes!' said Miss Villars, starting, having been letting



her doubts about kindness take the other direction, and feeling guilty of some want of sympathy with Madame d'Aurigny.

'That's good hearing. I don't fancy, between ourselves, it was always so. Here's the train; punctual, for a wonder. Good-bye, Miss Villars; good-bye, Rose. I'm particularly grateful for your care of my picture.'

With a shriek the train moved slowly off into the outside darkness; the lamps glimmered on the wet boards; porters shouldered great loads of luggage; the few passengers pressed out of the door; Miss Villars and Rose went more leisurely after them, and down the steps.

'Doesn't the wind howl, Aunt Clare?' exclaimed Rose. 'Oh, I hope it won't be a wet day for the clothing-club to-morrow.'

There was no doubt, at all events, that it would be a stormy night; and Miss Villars hurried on, afraid that she had been imprudent in bringing out the child, and worrying herself also with the fear that she was not doing all that was kind for Ursule Lafon. Decidedly, they saw very little of her; but the general opinion of the family was, that to see much of her would not be desirable, and Miss Villars was quite unprepared to combat the family opinion. What could she do? Only very vague answers to the question came into her head before they reached the green gate of the Rectory, and she dismissed the subject with a sigh.

Perhaps the Rectory drawing-room never looked so pleasant as of a winter's evening, when all the family were collected round the fire. By candle-light the colours of the furniture appeared less faded, and an unusually large grate, on which a log generally crackled, was, in itself, sufficient to make a less cosy room cheerful. The great oriel window was well curtained,

and outside the wind might rage or cry as loudly as it pleased without making any impression upon the walls of the old house. Sometimes, when tea was finished, Mr. Follaton betook himself to his study, and there remained until prayer-time called him forth ; occasionally, as on this night, he came into the drawing-room to sit by the side of the fire, in his capacious arm-chair, and read lighter literature in the form of *Quarterlies* or the *Evening Mail*. Looking at him, it was easy to see from whom Anne derived her features ; and yet, for all his plainness, Elsie's eyes were his ; and for all his plainness, too, you would never wish him to be better looking than he was. The head, with its short, iron-grey hair, was massive ; the features rugged, but kindly, absent in expression, but at times startling in their earnestness, without any signs of humour, and without any readiness to yield. It was almost ludicrous to see how the same face, softened into feminine nature, looked out of Anne as she sat next to her father, enjoying the idleness which, the girls proclaimed, the busy day had earned, in a singularly uncomfortable high-backed chair—taken not from preference, but because, in Anne's eyes, one chair was as good as another, and comfort was a thing more to be talked about than experienced. Elsie sat on the ground, resting her head against her sister. Contrary to custom, she was watching the fire, rather than joining in the conversation, which, with Miss Villars for a leader, was apt to be more discursive than brilliant. Clement's visit was talked over, and then the picture, and Ursule's emotion at its sight. Bella extracted that her aunt had mentioned the subject to their cousin, and had understood him to say there was no reason she should have been distressed at sight of it, since her father was alive and well, though, it might be, something of a scamp.

'There!' said Bella, triumphantly; but no one answered her. Her sisters were looking into the fire; her father, with knitted brows, was pondering over a review of the last Hindu book. Bella's exclamation passed unheeded, and she said nothing more to provoke comment. They were all silent for a time, down to small Rose; the log sputtered and crackled, the wind shook the windows with angry gusts, and a distant roar sounded like a still mightier power lashing itself into fury against the rocks.

'Anne,' said Mr. Follaton, laying down his review, 'I shall be glad if you will go with me to Defforton to-morrow.'

'To-morrow!'

'To-morrow? Oh, papa, you forget!'

'What have I forgotten, my dear?'

'The clothing-club—don't you recollect?'

'Surely it is not the time for the clothing sale,' said Mr. Follaton, passing his hand across his forehead. 'September—October——'

'It is November now, papa—more's the pity' added Elsie, under her breath.

'I believe you are right,' said her father, after a minute's reflection. 'But did you say the affair would take place to-morrow? Surely not: the arrangements have not been made.'

'Papa, we asked you, and you said Aunt Clare was to order it all to come as usual.'

'I was right, I hope?' said Miss Villars, nervously.

'I am very much indebted to you,' he said, with the old-fashioned politeness which he always displayed to her. 'But, Anne, I believe I have to perform certain duties at the clothing sale?'

'Yes, papa; you know you are always there to file the cards.'

'I remember. Then I must postpone going to Defforton. I

am positive I have seen a direct contradiction of a statement of this writer, but I cannot lay my hand upon it without going to the Chapter library. The man knows nothing of the matter—that is the truth—and makes deductions without any care to satisfy himself that his premises are correct. It becomes nothing less than unprincipled ;’ and Mr. Follaton, who could not have persuaded himself to destroy a snail, looked as if he were prepared to demolish the whole race of reviewers at a stroke.

‘Papa,’ said Elsie, mischievously—she always enjoyed stirring her father’s wrath against literary offenders—‘that book seems as if it would be a very interesting production for us to read?’

‘Because, as I am more and more forced to acknowledge, women form their judgments from appearances, undirected by judgment. You think it would be interesting since it is written in a pleasant, frivolous style——’

‘Oh!’ said Elsie, looking over his shoulder at the hard words.

‘Without depth or anything which requires common thought to comprehend——’

‘Oh!’ again.

‘And that on a subject which has been opened out by solid writers into an almost boundless field. His ignorance is absolutely appalling! I doubt whether he so much as knows the difference between Buddhism and Hinduism; he talks about Tukaram as the founder of a sect, instead of what he was, a poet of the people, an expounder of just the ordinary pantheistic Hindu doctrines, seen from the elevation of a nature somewhat in advance of its contemporaries in moral character; added to which, his remarks upon the commentaries of Sankarāchārya——’

‘Papa, papa!’ said Elsie, merrily, taking his face between her hands and kissing his forehead.

Poor Mr. Follaton looked up, fairly puzzled. 'What is the matter, my dear?'

'If that is the frivolous language to which you allude, I can only say that you must provide yourself with two or three pre-Adamite daughters accustomed to long names, before you can expect to have it read aloud to you.'

Mr. Follaton smiled abstractedly. He took up the review again, and read on, without any perception of the fact that Elsie and Bella were playing duets, and chattering busily to their aunt upon what would be the order of the next day.

'I hope you asked Mademoiselle Lafon, poor girl!' said kind-hearted Miss Villars.

'No,' Elsie said, looking a little ashamed of herself, 'I did not think of it. What would be the fun to her, Aunt Clare, knowing none of the people?'

'Perhaps it might be the means of her growing to know some of them.'

'She would not care. Is it likely that a French girl, suddenly transplanted here, should care to know the poor! Besides, I expect Miss Lafon is fastidious. Oh, Aunt Clare, if she goes there, she will put us all out!'

Miss Villars sighed, and again dropped Ursule's cause.

'The Roman Catholic priest came over from Heatherby, to-day,' announced Anne.

'And saw Madame d'Aurigny, I suppose?'

'I don't know; I suppose so. I met him coming out of the Cottage.'

'Ursule will be glad if she missed him,' said Bella. 'She declares he always treats her as if she were a renegade, and at Dieppe she was never molested. But she says she thinks she

was more nearly being a Romanist there than here. She likes St. Mary's so much.'

'I am glad she has the taste,' said Elsie, briefly.

'I believe you think there was never any place like Elmwood in the world!'

'Yes, I do. Go on, Bella; one, two, three; tum, tum, tum. Papa, are you tired of our tum-tumming?'

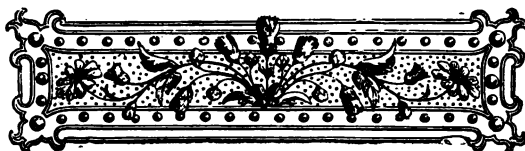
'Not at all, my dear; I have not been attending to it,' said Mr. Follaton, briskly, shutting his book, and coming over to stand behind his daughters. 'Very good, very pretty. I am pleased that you do not neglect your practising.'

'The wind is blowing sadly to-night, as far as to-morrow's prospects are concerned,' said Miss Villars, rising also to put away her work.

'Ah, to-morrow—the clothing sale, did you say? You must remind me of it in the morning, children, lest it should escape my memory.'

'Yes, papa,' said Elsie, saucily, we will remind you; but take care you don't affront Maria Tucker by calling her Mrs. Sanykanychary, or any other such name out of that frivolous volume of yours!'





## CHAPTER XVI.

### THE SPRING-TIDE.

The old sea-wall (he cried) is downe,  
The rising tide comes on apace,  
And boats adrift in yonder towne  
Go sailing uppe the market-place.

JEAN INGELOW.

**T**HE next day was, according to Rose, not quite so horrid as she expected; but neither was it exactly the weather to be chosen for any parish gathering. The rain had ceased, but the hills were blurred with mist; grey masses of cloud drove wildly across the sky; the last yellow leaves whirled off the trees, underneath; red mud lay deep in the roads. One or two of the women, whose tickets were fixed for an early hour, procured a lift in the carrier's cart as far as the school-house, and gathered in little knots in the porch, talking of the storm and of the husbands and sons at sea. Very soon there was an increasing flow of arrivals, a clank of pattens in the girls' room, which formed the waiting-room, and a smell of damp and woollens combined where Anne and Elsie, with four others to help them, were stationed behind the counters, measuring and reckoning to their hearts' content.

As the day wore on, people dropped in: not so many as were accustomed to come when the weather was fine, but still a fair sprinkling of those who were glad of the opportunity of meeting their neighbours of all classes on two days of the year. Mr. Chambers drove his wife from the Hall, and came in, hale and hearty, with a kindly word for most of the women, and especially for the old ones who had known him ever since he was born.

‘Well, Betty, glad to see you able to come here.’

‘T is so much as I can do, Sir, I do assure you. What with rheumatics and the fall I got the other day, I was most obliged to give it up. But, there, I’ll come so long as I can.

‘To be sure you will! Why, Betty, don’t you pretend to be getting old, when you look as fresh and young as if you were growing backwards.’

‘Ah, Mr. Frank, you always would have your joke. But I don’t complain; for there can’t be two forenoons in one day, and I’m thankful to be as I be.’

‘That’s right. You can’t get so far as the Hall, I know, so I shall come in to see you, and bring little Reggie, that you may see whether he is half as good-looking as his father was at his age.’

Of the sellers, Elsie was the most popular; she looked her blithest and prettiest, enjoying herself without the drawback of shyness which was apt to afflict her when she found herself in the society of her equals. Anne declared that, when the bales were overlooked at the conclusion of the sale, the missing half-yards, which not unfrequently caused dire confusion among the accounts, might be laid to Elsie’s door; she would not be persuaded that all her ‘little bits over’ could mount to something really considerable. But, as I said, this added to her popularity.

Mrs. Chambers stood in the middle of the room, talking to



Miss Villars in her easy, good-humoured fashion, feeling, it must be confessed, no great interest in the scene after the first ten minutes were over. She was a little weary of the village faces, and, before long, remembered to ask Miss Villars, with some eagerness, for the young French lady who lived at the Cottage, and had done them such good service the preceding evening.

Miss Villars hesitated slightly in her answer. 'Poor Ursule ! I wish she were here ; but I believe the girls scarcely thought she would enjoy such an affair as this.'

'Ursule—is that Mademoiselle Lafon's name ? How delightfully quaint and original ! I have always understood there was something quite romantic about the reason which induced Mrs. Blunt to leave the Cottage to her, but I have never been able to learn the rights of the story. She had never seen her, had she ?'

'Never. But Mrs. Blunt was under some obligations to Miss Lafon's relations.'

'It did not seem quite fair upon her son, I acknowledge. At the same time, I am quite glad to know some one so fresh and different. How I wish she were here ! Her remarks would be too delightful. Miss Villars, I fully intended calling upon her in the course of the next day or two ; do you think I might venture to drive there now, and bring her back with me ?'

Mrs. Chambers's 'might I venture' always appeared to put on one side the possibility of a negative. Miss Villars stammered and hesitated, and ended by saying she thought it would be a great kindness to the lonely girl. Bella, to her great mortification, had been unable to take any part in the conversation ; for Mr. Follaton had forgotten his spectacles, and she was obliged to stand by him and read the names on the cards as they were presented. She was astonished and vexed to see Mrs. Chambers drive away

again so quickly ; but more so to perceive her return, accompanied by Ursule, bright and smiling, with eyes full of wonder at the scene. Mrs. Chambers was as proud of her as is a child of its new doll, watching her graceful, animated gestures with delight, and making her speak to all the people who might be said to represent the heads of the village. Ursule herself enjoyed it heartily. It seemed like a little piece of sunshine, after the steady gravity of the last few months, to have these people talking to her, smiling at her, as if they were pleased. She did not understand the social distinctions, or that Mrs. Chambers was a greater woman than Mrs. Chapman, the doctor's wife : she liked them all, and was grateful to them for their notice. Every one was amused at her wonder and amusement over what seemed common-place enough to themselves : they found the old familiar things put before them in new lights, and began to think the originality was their own. It entertained them so much, that they scarcely noticed how every moment the wind gathered power, until two or three women came in breathless and wet, and a whisper went round that there were some fears about the tide that night, from the gale blowing south-east, directly on shore.

Mr. Chambers did not let his wife linger after he realised the state of affairs. They drove Ursule back to the Cottage ; and Elsie and Anne, finding the storm was growing into such a hurricane that no fresh customers could reach the school-room, left the mistress to wind up matters, and started off themselves to the sea. They were hardy girls, brought up to be afraid of no weather, however rough ; and they loved dearly, when a fine sea was running, to watch it from a little off-lying hamlet, which went by the name of the harbour, and was chiefly inhabited by fishermen's families.

The coast was backed by a ridge of hills of no great elevation, but exquisitely beautiful in form and colouring. Numberless little streams rose among them, and made their way down through the valleys to the sea ; and one of these it was which originally attracted boatmen to its neighbourhood, and had gradually gained the name of harbour for the basin at its mouth. Nothing could be fairer than the valley through which it ran, with its field after field of rich emerald-hued grass, and red cows standing placid and content in their sweet, dewy pastures. Far away were the purple hills. On one side of the valley rose a steep, high bank, clothed to the very summit with fruit-trees, laden in turn with blossom and fruit, and half hiding the thatched white-walled cottages around which they grew. At the foot of the bank wound a narrow, muddy, picturesque lane, where ferns and water-cresses and water-spiders and water-rats ran riot ; where everything was green and luxuriant ; where, on a hot summer's day, it was the most delicious thing in the world to sit on the grass bank between it and the stream, just at a certain point where the dog-wood gave place to an oak-tree, and a hurdle boundary was carried across the brook, and to listen to the cool, quiet babble of the water, and look over the green pastures to the blue hills and the bluer sky which shone serenely down between the oak leaves.

Just where the brook reached the shore, the sea had formed for itself a sort of natural basin ; and the fishermen being much in want of shelter for their boats, the basin had been enlarged, and two or three embankments thrown out, together with a strong low pier, to break the force of the water. At high tide the basin was full ; when it was low, the channel of the stream was the only water where boats could float, and the others remained high and dry under the wall.

But between the country as I have described it above, and the view of it when the sisters reached the harbour, there was a terrific difference. The distant outlines were blotted out by heavy, wild-looking clouds; bare, leafless trees shivered and bent beneath the tempest, as if mutely appealing for mercy; the cattle cowered under the hedges; great waves dashed furiously against the wall, hurling drenching columns of spray into the air with what seemed an irresistible power. Already more than one gap was torn in the embankment, and a road was under water; already three boats had been driven from their moorings, and were grinding against the wall. As Anne and Elsie turned the angle of the road which brought them within view of the angry waters, Anne was almost swept off her feet, and caught her sister's arm.

‘Elsie, it is impossible to stand; we must go back.’

‘Oh, how beautiful! Did you ever see such waves! We are quite wet with spray even here. What shall we do? I would not go back for the world. Look! look! the whole road is a sheet of water, and the tide not high yet. Isn't it glorious?’

‘There is Mary Matthews's cottage,’ suggested Anne, doubtfully. ‘We shall be wet through in five minutes, if we stay here.’

‘Well, we might go there. I suppose she can let us out through the orchard at the back; for see, Anne, the water has almost reached the walls. Now, run. Oh, what a pity it is that the others can't see it. There's a tree blown down in the meadow.’

Mary Matthews opened the door to them with a scared face and vast astonishment. To her the sight was so much more dreadful than beautiful, that she could not understand Elsie's exclamations of delight over the great, fierce, thundering waves. She

thought of the masters at sea, the women and the babies at home, and shook her head softly to herself over the girl's raptures. Her own husband lay at rest under the elms in St. Mary's churchyard, but there were brothers' and sisters' lads out in the heart of those angry waters; and, as she knew, after such a storm as this—such a storm as she never before remembered in all the long years she had lived in her old cottage—there would be wild work among bigger vessels than sloops and trawlers. She shook her head and sighed, as Elsie clapped her hands, watching the tide creeping closer and closer to the door, and Tom Matthews bringing sods of turf to lay inside, and form what protection he could against its filling the kitchen.

'Hadn't you better go back, Miss Elsie?' she said.

'I can't, Mary. Why, one may never see such a sight as this again in all one's life. I should like to be standing out in it, and letting the spray break over one.'

'They all knew where we were bound,' said Anne. 'But, Elsie, it will very soon be growing dark, and then we must go at once, or Aunt Clare will really be frightened. You can let us out through the orchard behind, Mary, can't you?'

'Yes, Miss, to be sure. Only take care as you pass the linhay; for I heard Tom say the slates was falling thick.'

'Anne, look! Here comes a grand monster, capped and crested, and all!'

'What are those people collected for on the bank?' said Anne, disregarding.

'Watching the poor boats, I suppose.'

'They are not on the boat side: something has happened, I am sure! See, they are stooping over the bank. Oh, Mary! what can it be?'

‘Well, Miss, I can’t say, I am sure. Where they’re standing is just where the brook runs under the road; and I heard them telling that the sea had dug two or three holes right out of the road; so it may be something of that sort. However, there goes Tom, and wet to the skin he’ll get before he reaches them.’

They were making signs, Elsie said, breathlessly, her delight in the waves giving way to terror. ‘Anne, don’t you think we might go?’

‘You go, Miss Elsie? You’d never get there! Look at Tom, and see how he’s obliged to hold on by the railings to keep out of the wash of the sea. Bless the boy; I wish he’d have stopped over here with me!’

Elsie did not answer. She was watching Tom staggering along the road, holding down his head to avoid being blinded by the spray, and every now and then quite hidden in it. Anne had her eyes fixed upon the little group at the other end of the basin.

‘There are five, and three of them are women. I am sure they are in distress about something.’

‘It is horrible to be so near and yet not to be able to do anything,’ said Elsie, walking about the little room, as if she found it impossible to sit still.

‘Oh dear! oh dear!’ said Mary Matthews, wringing her hands, ‘the water’s beginning to soak in. We shall have the kitchen full, and such a mess as there will be!’

It was a relief to have something to do, and the girls helped to push sacking against the door, getting not a little wet in the process, but full of excitement. They resisted Mary Matthews’s entreaties that they would go home before the water spread more thoroughly over the floor, and climbed on the window-

seat once more to look out between the leaves of lanky geraniums and fuchsias at the wild scene in front.

The little ill-fitting casement rattled and shook with the fury of the wind ; clouds of spray were driven violently against it ; it was impossible to see clearly what was happening where the group of people were still gathered in the road. They could now and then make out figures running, beaten back by the wind, drenched by the sea ; but, what with the fading light, and the hurly-burly, and the spray, Mary Matthews could not so much as distinguish her son ; and their curiosity had almost arrived at an irrepressible pitch, when they caught a sound of a splash through the water, and a man passed the window, whom Elsie greeted with a violent rapping at the glass, and a glad cry of ' Clement, Clement ! '

He guessed why the door resisted his push, and came back to the window ; but neither he nor his cousins could make each other hear, and it was impossible to attempt opening the window. By dint of signs and pointing, however, Anne induced him to look round ; and he understood enough to start off immediately in Tom's track, watched by the sisters with great satisfaction.

There was no danger in traversing the road round the basin, but a good deal of difficulty, from the tremendous force of the wind and the blinding power of the waves, which came with a mighty crash against the wall, and then leaped high above it and fell in a deluge across the road. Clement would scarcely have believed it possible that he should make so little way ; strong man as he was, there were moments when he could scarcely keep his footing ; and never before had he so completely realised the terrific might of those rolling waves as when he saw what they could do even in this comparatively sheltered cove.

The proceedings of the knot of people at the other end puzzled him even when he neared them sufficiently to be able to distinguish better. They were standing just over the place where the little brook ran under the road into the sea, looking apparently into a hole in the road. A hole it was, as he made out in another minute or two; and Tom Matthews was half-way down it, working away with might and main; but just as Clement reached the spot, he hoisted himself out with a vigorous effort, and stood disconsolately on one side, shaking his head in answer to the eager questions which poured upon him.

It was almost the worst spot in the road. Every wave, as it struck the wall, poured over it. The women clinging to the railing for support were drenched to the skin. One was crying bitterly; the others giving what comfort they could.

'Her child's fallen into the hole, sir,' said Tom Matthews in answer to Clement's eager inquiry, and making a sign over his shoulder in the mother's direction.

'Into the hole? Surely you can soon get it out?'

'So we thought, sir, and didn't try to get more help. But not one of us can move the poor little chap; his foot's jammed into the grating.'

'Good Heavens!' exclaimed Clement, looking in the hole; 'in another few minutes——'

He stopped suddenly. The mother had crept up to him and clutched his arm.

'You'll save him, Mr. Clement,' she said in a hoarse voice. 'You'll save my poor little lad? Father's away—he hasn't got no one but me.'

'Save him? Yes, by God's help. Tom, run to the blacksmith's for a crow-bar. Any rope at hand?'

There was none. They seemed to have believed that there



was no difficulty whatever in rescuing the child, and to have been slow in finding out what was the reason that he screamed whenever they touched him, until he became too exhausted to do more than moan feebly. At the first instant Clement scarcely saw what had happened; but now it was evident that the sea had ploughed a great hole in the road, and weakened the little arch under which the brook ran, so that a portion of it had fallen in. How the little boy tumbled in he had no means of knowing; but he guessed at what was the truth—that in stooping over and peering in with his companions, the edge had broken away, and he had been unable to recover himself. The other children had run screaming home; the mother and two or three friends had rushed out, and thought there would be little difficulty in extricating him. But the brook water flowed out through an iron grating, and presently it was discovered that his foot was wedged in some terrible way, so as to hold him fast, and prevent the possibility of dragging him up without stronger measures. Each person had laughed at the other, and thought they would be able to manage it better; and so valuable time had been consumed, and they were just awakening to a perception that the force of the waves was so rapidly affecting the wall, that at any instant a breach might be made, and all hope destroyed.

Not a moment was to be lost. Indeed, the danger was so imminent that Clement made the women stand in safety, before he lowered himself into the gaping hole. The waves, with a hungry roar, shook and battered at the wall, dragging away block after block of masonry and earth, and tossed angrily over the road to fall heavily into the pit. The boy was apparently senseless, for he neither moved nor cried. Do what he would, Clement could not prevent the earth breaking away at the

sides with his weight, and rolling down upon the child. The actual aperture through to the rushing stream was small—scarcely more than sufficient for the little foot to pass through ; but the very act of disentangling it from the grating might enlarge it fatally, and cause the bridge to sink in. Clement realised the peril of his task, and set about it calmly and quietly, with one quick thought, which was, in truth, a prayer, and the remembrance that, after all, he was the best person to risk his life, since there were none left to depend upon him for any portion of their earthly happiness.

‘Give me your necktie, Jack, quick !’

It was to knot to his own handkerchief, and to fasten round his arm, so that it would afford a slight assistance, in case of any violent slip, Jack lying on the ground, and stretching over the edge to hold it, but presently obliged to let go, when Clement, planting his feet as firmly as he could on either side, stooped low over the child, and cautiously passed his hand through the hole to feel the foot.

He drew it back, disappointed, unable to reach so far.

‘Tom’s brought the rope and the bar, sir.’

He had brought three men besides ; but it was impossible for more than one to be in the hole at the same time, since, even as it was, Clement felt as if all his efforts only increased the boy’s danger. He could but tie the rope securely to both himself and little Phil, and then, again feeling for the grating, introduce the crowbar as gently as he could, and do his best to loosen it. He could see nothing ; scarcely dared to use the necessary force for fear of the whole arch giving way, and for fear, also, of injuring the limb ; and was so cramped and stiffened by his position that his arm was almost powerless. Was the iron yielding ? He felt a thrill of hope run through him,

made a more tremendous effort, and the resistance gave way. Little Phil had opened his eyes, and was looking at him with half-unconscious wonder. Clement drew up the bar, put his arm round him, and called out, 'Pull, my boy, pull!'

There was a moment's struggle as the little fellow obeyed; then he sank lower—a torrent of water rushed in from above; a quantity of earth and stones rattled down. Clement saw, with horror, that the gaping hole was twice as large as before, and that only the support of the rope kept the child from falling through. He was becoming frightfully exhausted himself, but still this last misfortune gave him a better hope: he was now able to see the grating, although very dimly, and, if there was only time, he believed he could insert the crowbar in the right place.

*If!* As he stooped lower and lower, he heard Tom Matthews's voice above, hurried and hoarse—'For God's sake, Sir, come up and leave him. The sea will be in in a minute!'

It was the other peril which he had forgotten that now threatened fearfully. The waves were eating their way through. They tore out the great stones, and, rising higher every instant, it was plain that they might at any moment sweep away the road and the embankment together, and if Clement clung to the boy, he was lost. It all rushed into his mind. The wild longing for life leapt up; but still he went on, feeling, groping, straining. The bar was in; the effort he made to move it was almost convulsive; another, and another, with the deadly probability of what might come kept steadily before his mind—the ever-increasing likelihood that another second might see them buried in the falling earth, or swept away by the victorious waves. Again and again, Tom, at the peril of his life, stooped over to implore him to desist; and still he worked, until Tom,

through the roar of the wind and waves, heard a gasping cry to draw up, and, faint, weary, and exhausted, Clement clambered out of the hole, dragging the little boy after him.

It was time. The men had not a moment to utter the cheer which was in their hearts, the mother had not reached her child, safe ground was barely gained, when a huge wave licked out a piece of the frail support that remained, and the sea broke completely through to the hole, and in a moment had made for itself a great gap, threatening the safety of the whole embankment, and driving the little group to seek a more secure standing-place. The mother was more taken up with making sure that little Phil was unhurt, than in thanking his deliverer ; but the others crowded round him with hearty words of approval.

‘T was more than most would have done, to stick to the poor little chap when things were so far gone as they was,’ remarked one of the men.

‘T was what your father would have liked to have seen, Sir,’ said old Richard Andrews ; and Clement turned towards him with a glad, grateful look, as if the allusion had gone straight to his heart.

‘Not one of you would have left him,’ he said, grasping a big rough hand, held out to him by a man who had known him from a child, and now looked him over with unmistakable pride and affection, although he and Clement had before now had some dispute about a poaching business. ‘He isn’t really hurt, is he?’

‘No, no, Sir,’ said one of the women he approached ; ‘no thing to speak of : he may have got his ankle twisted a bit, and he’s frightened and dazed, and no wonder ; but, bless you, he isn’t hurt.’

‘Doesn’t want the doctor?’

‘Not he, Sir. His mother ’ll take him home and put him to bed. That’s the best thing for him.’

The women were in the ascendant now, feeling as if their participation in the fright and wetting had gained them a right to be heard ; and the men turned off one by one to look at the mischief the storm was working. Clement followed to the door of Susan Blake’s cottage, that he might assure himself of little Phil’s welfare before he made his way as best he could across the meadows to his cousins. The boy was a little sturdy fellow, of about six years old, and he very soon began to revive into his ordinary self ; his mother gradually, as the fright wore off, relieving her feelings by scolding him heartily for the adventure. Clement turned away with a sigh ; there seemed such an absolute absence of thankfulness or recognition of the Mercy which had given back her son. He could but hope that, when she was able calmly to reflect over all that happened, gratitude would spring up to Him who kept the waves by His decree.

It was growing quite dark. He was wet through, and more exhausted than he liked to acknowledge. To get to the road on the other side of the fields, he was forced to make a considerable round ; for the water was deep in it, owing to the breach in the embankment ; and even then, since the tide was pouring down the road, and the water was two feet deep before Mary Matthews’s cottage, he had some difficulty in entering the latter from the back. He found his cousins fairly terrified by his absence. Elsie had made an attempt to follow him, but had been literally beaten back ; consequently, obliged to pass her time by endeavours to dry her clothes, with a great deal more water in the kitchen than was agreeable. Anne was

growing very anxious to get home; Elsie, only bent upon knowing what had happened.

‘What was it? Tell us, quick, Clement!’

‘It was a queer sort of accident. The sea dug a hole in the road, and little Phil Blake contrived to tumble into it, and get caught by the leg.’

‘And who took him out?’

‘Tom held the ropes; I pulled.’

‘How sparing you are of your words, Clement! Do tell us a little more. It is so dark I can’t see you properly, but I fancy your face looks queer. Oh, and you are quite, quite wet!’

‘Yes, I am; so come along, let us go home as fast as we can.’

Only tell us just this—is he safe? and was what you did dangerous?’

‘Dangerous? pooh! Mary, I don’t half like leaving you alone here.’

Mrs. Matthews looked ruefully at her lime-ash floor, over which the water was slowly streaming.

‘If I’d a-known what was coming, I wouldn’t have fagged my poor back with scrubbing it out yesterday.’

Anne was the only person who gave her any sympathy. Elsie was indignant at her want of perception of the beautiful; and Clement was thinking whether there was danger to the cob walls of the cottage. He proposed that she should sleep at the Rectory; but she repudiated the idea. The tide would be turning soon; Tom would be there in a minute or two; she should do well enough, and would be glad to think the young ladies were safe home. Evidently the best thing to be done was to follow her advice, as their long absence was likely to

cause much alarm ; and so they went out through a yard, and round an orchard, where the old apple-trees groaned and creaked under the force of the wind, until they reached the high road and comparative shelter.

Until then, walking had been too hard work for conversation to be possible, and Anne's voice sounded very breathless as she asked,

'How came you to know where we were, Clement? or how came you to Elmwood at all?'

'They talked, in Defforton, of a tremendous storm, and I couldn't resist the combined attractions of a south-east gale and a spring-tide. Then I met Miss Villars, returning in a depressed state of mind from that horribly fusty festival, your clothing-club ; and, finally, hearing that you had gone where I was going, I followed, and was told by Dick Summers that you were to be found at Mary Mathews's. That's the long and short of the matter.'

'It was very lucky for little Phil that you came,' said Anne.

'Yes,' said Elsie, in rather a disappointed tone ; 'but I thought there was a real adventure going on, and it doesn't seem to have been anything.'

Her cousin was silent for a minute or two ; then he said, in a low voice,

'I ought not to have made quite so light of it as I did to Anne just now. There was a good deal of danger about it, though no more than the other men would have faced readily, if they had had the chance ; and it was a very merciful escape. One ought to acknowledge it to others as well as oneself.'

Elsie could not help pressing his arm a little. She knew that Clement was reserved about his own feelings, and that to say what he had done was an effort to him. She only ventured to

whisper, 'We must all be very thankful ;' and the cousins walked on silently.

At the door of the Cottage, Clement stopped.

'You will come on to the Rectory?' said Anne.

'Thank you, no. I shall get a bed here; and if you can manage this bit by yourselves, I begin to feel as if dry clothes would be a luxury. Besides, I did not see my aunt yesterday. You should have shown Mademoiselle Lafon the sea.'

'Oh, Clement !'

'Well?'

'She does not fall into our ways a bit.'

'Or you don't fall into hers; which is it?'

'Well, you can't expect us to do so,' said Elsie, perversely.

'Certainly not. Ways is ways, as old Betty says; and when you're in Turkey, you must do as the Turkeys do. May it never be your fate to find yourself out of that happy country! It seems to me that you conservative people approve of no conservatism but your own.'

Elsie felt a little provoked, and went on defending herself.

'I am quite sure, Clement, that she would rather be left alone.'

'I should think so. It is not particularly pleasant to take the preliminary steps to friendship through a thorny thicket.'

'Friendship!'

'Is the thing out of the question?'

'You have never done much towards making us friends,' retorted Elsie, in desperation.

Mr. Blunt felt himself silenced, and thought it better to end the conversation.

'We'll fight it out another day,' he said; 'the wind is just now stronger than arguments. Make haste home, children, or there will be a hue and cry after you.'



Elsie went home dissatisfied. She did not like quarrelling with Clement at the very time when he had begun to fulfil her ideas of a hero, and she was puzzled with his displeasure. Or was he displeased? What did he want? A strange girl coming here, coming as an interloper, bringing her foreign ways to disturb them—a girl to whom she was expected to talk French—how could she be more cordial than she had been? Elsie had been inclined to take credit to herself for having ever spoken to her at all. She was not aware of the degree in which she intrenched herself behind an impenetrable fence of shyness, stiffness, and actual disagreeable manners; and her highest idea of any duty towards Ursule consisted in leaving her without molestation to her own society. If she and Anne had been more willing to be guided by Miss Villars, matters might have been upon a better footing; but it was almost an impossibility to the latter to assert herself, and it was a sort of rule in the house that the girls should choose their own way in matters that were not absolutely matters of decided right and wrong. ‘Bella likes Miss Lafon,’ Elsie would say, with a little contempt, as if it absolved her from any responsibility. Anne rested very much upon Elsie. She was more practical, and less imaginative, inclined to distrust her own judgment and to be guided by her sister, and afflicted with a self-consciousness of her own plainness and awkwardness, which made the society of strangers a complete penance, to be avoided in every practicable manner.

Elsie was half angry, half sorry, over Clement’s lecture. It was possible, however, that it might not be without its effect, since the last thing she said to Anne that night, in a very sleepy voice, was the remark,

‘I wish Joyce was here!’



## CHAPTER XVII.

BELLA.

The deeds we do, the words we say,  
Into still air they seem to fleet—  
We count them ever past;  
But they shall last—  
In the dread judgment they  
And we shall meet!

LYRA INNOCENTIUM.

**T**HE wind moderated during the night, and the morning sun shone out clear and tranquil, as if all the violence of the preceding day had been a dream. The water had forced its way in many places through the barriers which had for years restrained it; part of the railway was washed away; two or three roads were impassable; the meadow nearest the harbour was flooded; and people crowded down to see the worst gap of all—the scene of little Phil's rescue. But there was no turmoil now; the invading water looked like a beautiful lake, and smiled a serene welcome upon the spectators. Little Phil himself was playing and shouting with his companions at a safe distance from the treacherous hole; the women who were to attend the second day's clothing

sale condoled with one another upon the long distance round which the breaking up of the road compelled them to walk ; Mary Matthews began disconsolately to scrub at the curved black line which marked the progress of the water in her kitchen. Everything looked much the same as ever, although the hamlet had just escaped a great danger, and old sailors shook their heads, and wondered what would have happened if the tide had run but another half-hour.

Sarah had an especial talent for finding out, within a marvelously short space of time, what was done in the neighbourhood ; and she was so proud of the report she was able to convey to Madame d'Aurigny, through Ursule's interpretation, of Clement having supported the bridge upon his shoulders, and dug out, apparently, nothing less than a whole school of boys, that Ursule, incredulous as she felt, would not hurt the old woman by laughing, and managed to report it, softened in detail, without breaking down.

Clement himself came into the drawing-room in the morning, before starting, looking highly amused. She glanced at him, and ventured to say demurely,

‘You are not the worse for your exploits, I hope?’

‘If I could do all that Sarah credits me with, I should scarcely be the worse for anything. I never expected to find myself on a level with the Seven Champions of Christendom.’

‘It must have been brave, though!’ Her eyes kindled, and she clasped her hands as she spoke ; and Clement was again struck with the expression of her face, which Louis loved to describe as beautiful, and which he had himself often called insignificant.

‘You will go and see the havoc the water has made?’ he said, after a pause.

‘Yes, indeed; Jock and I are going by-and-bye, when we can be spared.’

‘Mademoiselle Lafon, surely you might find a better companion than Jock?’

‘Monsieur Blunt, I think not. We are the most excellent friends in the world.’

Another pause followed, and then Clement said, with that same little touch of irritation which seemed to be imminent whenever the subject was mooted, ‘The Rectory people would not be much flattered!’

Ursule looked at him in surprise. Did he really not understand? or was she expected to force an intimacy with his cousins? She was out of patience with them all, cold, proud, and disagreeable as she had found them; and she only condescended to answer by a little expressive shrug, which Mr. Blunt perfectly understood.

‘Both Anne and Elsie have excellent qualities,’ he persisted.

‘Excellent.’

‘They are thoroughly good girls.’

‘Without doubt.’

‘And as to Miss Villars, she is all that is kind.’

‘Indeed, she is,’ answered Ursule, with real warmth of tone.

‘Then why will you not like them better? Why not show friendship towards them?’

‘Because,’ said she, turning round quickly, with eyes brimful of tears—‘because they think me—they treat me as an enemy, as you all do,’ she went on, with a great sob that would not be controlled. ‘You all hate me: you all wish that I had never come here! I did not want your money—your house. I was a hundred times happier in the old house, with my friends, than here in your cold, cheerless England, where the people are

like the skies, and have no sun in their hearts. I wish you would take it all again, and let me go !'

She poured out the words with trembling eagerness, and Clement was struck dumb. There was so much truth in them, that he could not frame an answer. He was ashamed of himself—ashamed of the want of generosity of which she accused him—ashamed of the absolute unkindness which it must have required to open her eyes to the perception of her position. And, with it all, a great pity surged up in his heart for the loneliness which at last had uttered a complaint. He did not know a twentieth part of the patience and forbearance she had been called upon to exercise ; but he no longer thought them impossible qualities for her. He turned away, and stood by the window ; and when he looked round, Ursule was gone.

Clement's exclamation was anything but romantic. 'Confound it !' he said, 'what on earth is one to do ?' He walked moodily out of the house, along the road, into the station, pondering the question in his heart, and experiencing something of a man's provoked feeling when he has made arrangements for certain results, and the results fail. He had found fault with his cousins, it was true ; but Mademoiselle Lafon had included him among her enemies. Nor could he help, with a sense of shame, acknowledging that in his thoughts he had treated her as a despoiler of his rights, and vaunted his own generosity towards her. It was very small, there was no denying it ; and, if Clement's nature had not been generous at the core, the acknowledgment must have made him dislike Ursule more than ever. As it was, he felt bitterly that he must leave matters to right themselves. The Elmwood atmosphere might in time become more genial. 'The sun does shine in our skies sometimes, cold-hearted people though we be !' said he to himself

looking out of the carriage-window at the wintery meadows. 'Poor girl! I should not have guessed that there was much in that old Dieppe house; but I suppose she had something she misses here, in spite of her change in position.' And, oddly enough, the same thought came uppermost which Elsie had expressed the night before—'I wonder whether Joyce could do any good?'

Ursule did not go to the harbour with Jock only, after all. Mrs. Chambers drove round for her, after the clothing-club sale was over, and took her to the spot where she could best understand what damage had been effected. Mrs. Chambers was not very clever, but she was very pleasant. She was a little addicted to sudden fits of friendship; and, while they lasted, her good nature and kindness were unfailing: the reason they did not last was that, before long, she grew tired of them, and wanted variety. She was never unkind to her old favourites—only dropped them and forgot them. Ursule was thoroughly different from the other people about Elmwood, so that she threw every one else at once into the shade. Moreover, Mrs. Chambers talked French beautifully, and knew it; and it was a pleasure to her to have so rare an opportunity of showing off her accomplishment. Meanwhile, Ursule herself was radiant. She expanded under the pleasant sunshine, and did not give a thought to its uncertainty, laughed and chatted, and found Mrs. Chambers full of admiration for her beautiful France, and far from being an adherent to the Rectory creed, that Elmwood was the most perfect place in the whole world.

'My dear child, they know no better,' she said, laughing.

'They have such little hearts to think so!'

'I can quite understand how it strikes a stranger,' said Mrs. Chambers, with complacency; 'and I am sorry you have de-

rived your first experience of English life from Elmwood society. But you must go to London, and learn better.'

'I?' said Ursule, bewildered. 'Oh, no; I shall never go away until——' She hesitated.

'Until when?'

'I was going to say, until I go back—back to France. Some day, perhaps, if Madame d'Aurigny can spare me, I shall go.'

Mrs. Chambers was just going to inquire about Ursule's home life, when an entanglement of the whip took off her attention. When that was set right, she asked,

'Do you see those houses on the hill?'

'*Le petit village qui s'accuse?*' Ursule asked, smiling.

'Yes, exactly; one sees it everywhere. My brother's place is close to it. I must drive you there some day.'

It was by no means the first promise of the same kind. Ursule thanked her gratefully, and felt as if pleasant vistas were opening out before her. Mrs. Chambers laughed good-humouredly at Elsie and Anne, and touched their father and Miss Villars and all the Elmwood folk with a light, amusing vein of mockery, which was not ill-nature, and yet was apt to lower those upon whom it was exercised in the opinion of others. There was a worldly, frivolous tone about her; and coming to Ursule veiled in the charm of kindness and interest, such as others denied, its danger was increased a hundredfold. Hers was not a character peculiarly susceptible of impressions of either kind; but she was warm-hearted, and it was delightful to find some one on whom she could lavish a little affection after the repression she had lately taught herself; and Mrs. Chambers seemed ready to absorb it all, petting and praising her by light and delicate allusions, at which it was impossible to take offence.

‘There are your people,’ she said, as they came in sight of the harbour, pointing with her whip to a group standing still in the middle of the road.

‘Mine, Madame ?’ answered Ursule, with a little repudiating shrug.

‘No, indeed ; I beg your pardon. But you will discover in time that the Rectory and the Cottage have always been looked upon as one. Just notice Anne. Was there ever such an ungainly girl ? I can assure you that her coming out has been a serious trial to me ; it is so terrible to be obliged to invite her to one’s dinner-parties, and not even to have the satisfaction of supposing it a pleasure to herself, poor child. Elsie would be much better as far as appearances are concerned ; but she looks exactly like a frightened deer directly any one speaks five words to her.’

‘She is very pretty,’ said Ursule, sighing ; for something about Elsie had made her yearn for a little friendliness from her.

‘Yes,’ said Mrs. Chambers, meditatively ; ‘I believe it would not be impossible to do something with Elsie. But I like Bella the best. There is not so much ground to get over in making her out. We will leave the carriage here, and walk to this wonderful hole, of which they talk so much, and of which Clement is the hero. By the way, I have not asked you yet how you like Clement.’

Ursule coloured so vividly with the remembrance of the morning, that Mrs. Chambers looked a little surprised ; but she only answered, quietly, that she scarcely knew. Madame d’Aurigny was very fond of him.’

‘Ah ! I dare say. Most old ladies are. My husband always stands up for Clement ; and I shall like him better when he has seen more of the world, and had the conceit taken out of him.’



‘Do you think him conceited, Madame?’ asked Ursule, with astonishment.

‘I think he has a very good opinion of Clement Blunt, Esq.’

‘He was so good to——’ She stopped suddenly, with the feeling that, kind as her companion was, she could not speak to her about Louis. Mrs. Chambers did not heed her. They had reached the Follaton group, and she was making herself as pleasant to them as if she had not just now been taking off their little peculiarities. Ursule could not help smiling at Anne’s evident consternation, and at the grunts which she forced herself to utter by way of reply. As to Mr. Follaton, shy as he was, he was too much absorbed in the subject of his researches, *i.e.*, the action of the water upon the overthrown stones, to pay the least regard to Mrs. Chambers’s bantering; and it was as much as Elsie could do to prevent him from clambering down the hole in pursuit of some particularly favourable specimen. Bella was indignant beyond measure at the sight of Ursule on confidential terms with Mrs. Chambers, to the jeopardy of her own schemes for being driven about behind the pretty bay ponies. Miss Villars, with tears in her eyes, was describing what she had heard of Clement’s conduct from one of the men who had been on the scene. From what he had said to the girls, they had no conception of the greatness of the peril.

‘Brooks tells me he shall never forget his face when Susan Blake got hold of the child.’

‘Would they have been actually killed? One can scarcely realise it,’ said Mrs. Chambers, looking into the hole, full of water and rubbish.

‘Ah,’ Elsie said, ‘now it is low water; but, if you had seen it last night, you would have felt that nothing could escape which those waves once seized upon.’

‘Were you here?’ Ursule ventured to inquire of Anne.

‘Yes,’ said Anne, in her shy, repellant manner.

‘And you saw it all?’

‘Oh, no. We were in that cottage. Oh, I beg your pardon!’

For, in her hurry to escape, Anne trod upon Mrs. Chambers’s dress, and heard an ominous tear. The lady looked annoyed; and Anne became crimson: she very nearly, in her bewilderment, stepped back into the hole; but Bella caught her arm, produced a pin, and had done her best to repair the mischief before poor Anne recovered her composure.

‘And so,’ said Mrs. Chambers, going back to the original subject—‘so Clement Blunt is to be the hero of the day? As far as my experience goes, I do not think he will dislike the position. Well, Elsie, do not look fierce with those great eyes of yours, as if I had said a very cruel thing. Why should he not enjoy hero-worship as much as other mortals?’

‘If you mean,’ Elsie said, steadily, though with an evident effort, ‘that Clement will always feel glad and thankful when he remembers last night, I am sure you are right: we all feel it, don’t we, Aunt Clare? But as to caring about what people say of it, he will do no such thing; he neither thinks of people nor their opinions,’ she added, with some scorn.

Mrs. Chambers laughed. ‘We all think of people, Elsie—even you,’ she said, lightly, ‘however much you may profess to despise them. And why not? Perhaps their admiration may, on the whole, be as satisfactory a reward as seeing little Phil Blake grow up one of the idle good-for-nothing youths whom my husband every now and then commits to jail. There, look at him now, fighting and howling as if he was on the high road to it!’

Ursule bit her lip. Anne looked eagerly up; but she dared

not answer Mrs. Chambers. To her great relief, a voice from behind said gravely,

‘The question is not one of comparison between present and future. With that, man has nothing to do : it rests in higher hands. Whether Clement will derive the truest happiness from the remembrance that he has manfully tried to do his duty in the sight of God, or from the applause of his fellow-men, is the doubt ; and no one who has tested the two rewards will be perplexed as to their respective value.’

Very seldom did Mr. Follaton listen or join in conversation in which he was not directly concerned. His words, spoken in a peculiarly sweet, distinct voice, made all the more impression from their unexpectedness. Anne looked relieved and satisfied ; Mrs. Chambers said, more gravely than was her wont,

‘Thank you, Mr. Follaton. You have made me ashamed of myself. One does not keep those things before one as one should.’

The indefinite pronoun has convenient shoulders for burden-bearing ; but Mrs. Chambers was sincere in her feeling, although she said ‘one’ instead of ‘I.’ As for Ursule, she felt as if she must always like Mr. Follaton after this. It had been inexpressibly painful to her to hear Clement’s brave deed lowered—degraded, as it was, by the tone of Mrs. Chambers’s remarks. For the time she was inclined to detest her new friend, and to burst forth in his defence with Elsie. But Elsie showed plainly that she did not consider that she, a stranger, could have anything to do with the matter ; and Ursule found herself wondering, with a little vexed amusement, how-long a time it took to be naturalized at Elmwood. She turned away with a sigh ; and Mrs. Chambers’s frank speech won back her liking.

Bright as the day was, and calm and beautiful the waters, the air was keen enough to make standing still for any length of time a chilly proceeding; and the party, with the exception of Mr. Follaton and his eldest daughter, walked back together to the place where Mrs. Chambers's pretty ponies were impatiently waiting for their mistress's return. Bella was next to her now, and she seized the opportunity.

'Anne and Elsie are going to Defforton to-morrow with papa,' she said, disconsolately.

'And you are to be left alone? Poor Bella, that is too bad!'

'They are the two eldest, you see,' said she, with a sigh. She did not think it necessary to explain that, having declared she could not bear all the dull visits papa intended to pay, Elsie had benevolently offered to endure them in her stead.

'I should make a fuss, if I were you,' continued Mrs. Chambers, laughing. 'Do you mean they will not have you?'

'We can't go three,' replied Bella, silencing her conscience by the reflection that this was the truth, if not the whole truth.

Mrs. Chambers was a good-natured woman, and liked to make people happy, when it could be achieved without cost to herself. 'You shall drive with me to Ferncombe, if that will do as well,' she said kindly. 'I can take Mademoiselle Lafon there another day.'

'Oh, thank you! That will be delightful. I shall so enjoy those dear ponies and all. I can't tell you how much obliged I am.'

She was very much obliged. Mrs. Chambers was rather the grand lady of the neighbourhood; Bella was of opinion that her sisters never made enough of her, and secretly resolved that, by the time she was a grown-up young lady, the intimacy should be on a more satisfactory footing between the Hall and

the Rectory. Intimacy with Mrs. Chambers meant dances and dinner-parties, and picnics and croquet; possibly even, for prime favourites, a season in London. Bella's eyes sparkled at the thought. Meanwhile, there was an untold delight in tasting the good things of the world, in driving in a well-appointed carriage, in being waited upon by men-servants, in enjoying the sense of luxury, in seeing the children run out from the cottages, and curtsy to Miss Bella in her exaltation. She could not bear the idea of being deprived of all this by Ursule—poor Ursule—who again was to be looked upon as an interloper. Poorer Bella, who was suffering her heart to harden into selfishness!

Elsie had heard something of her sister's conversation, and it pained her inexpressibly. She was so high-minded and truthful herself, that anything of deceit was, in her eyes, the most unpardonable of faults. She could not bring herself to think patiently of Bella's pretended disappointment—of the victory she had gained. Directly the carriage had driven off, she looked at the culprit steadily with her clear, honest eyes, until Bella winced, and, going round to her aunt's side, began talking rapidly, with the hope of shaking off Elsie's reproaches. But Miss Villars turned unexpectedly into a farm-house, and, before her niece could follow, she heard her sister's low 'Bella!' with a whole world of indignation in the tone.

There was no escape, and she faced round. 'Well, what?'

'How could you let Mrs. Chambers suppose that you were not allowed to go to Defforton!'

'And how could you do such a horridly mean thing as to listen!' answered Bella pettishly, trying to shift the blame.

'I never willingly listen to what I am not intended to hear. Oh, Bella! I would have given a great deal not to have heard that!'

For a moment, if she had but known it, she had made an impression. Her sister turned away her head ; but she did not answer, and Elsie grew more severe.

‘No one will trust you.’

‘I told no story,’ Bella said, sullenly.

‘You acted one. You made Mrs. Chambers believe that you wanted to go to Defforton, that you were not allowed to go, and therefore you persuaded her to take you with her to-morrow.’

‘I won’t be dictated to by you ! You are not papa, nor Aunt Clare, nor even Anne ; and you have no business to meddle with what does not concern you.’

‘Does not concern me ? Oh, Bella !’

‘It does not. You are jealous of Mrs. Chambers liking me better than she does you, and so you say these spiteful things. I dare say you would like to publish them to Mrs. Chambers herself, if you had the chance.’

Elsie took no notice of the taunt ; it fell too harmless to touch her.

‘I wish you would put me out of your head,’ she said, sadly, ‘and think only of the right and wrong. Of course, I have no exact right to control you ; but even little Rose would have the right to protest against such—such absolute deceit.’

She said the word under her breath, as if ashamed to speak it. Bella only coloured angrily.

‘I won’t be ordered by you,’ she began ; but her sister put up her hand, and stopped her.

‘I am not ordering. I did not mean to seem to do so ; but I could not—with a shadow of love in my heart—hear what I heard, and not speak. I am not going to say any more, so do not let us quarrel. Aunt Clare is coming out.’

Bella felt a momentary pang ; Elsie’s manner, more than her

words, showed how deeply she was distressed. But the pang did not last. She thought to herself, that, whatever her sister might feel, she would say nothing to others; and if others did not know it, why then Bella did not very much care. She was a little bit shocked at herself—just a little; she might have managed better, she thought, if only she had time. But, after all, it was not much—only a small equivocation: and Elsie and Anne were always so stupidly particular; even in their childish games their word was a sacred thing, and the very shadow of a falsehood an impossibility. People were not like them. It was impossible to be so very precise. And so Bella comforted herself as she walked home in the quiet of a November twilight.

When Ursule reached the Cottage, Mrs. Chambers kissed her kindly, promised to come again soon, promised to see Madame d'Aurigny, promised a dozen things which were all to be pleasant and bright, and drove away, leaving her in a state of enthusiasm over the coming of this little fairy, who seemed to be bent upon turning Elmwood into a bower of delight. Sarah, as she opened the door, stared at her young mistress in amazement: she had never before seen the Ursule of a few months back—the Ursule who used to stand at the head of the old staircase and tend the pigeons—the Ursule who had been a petted, wilful girl. The Mademoiselle Lafon she knew was different from these; and it was no wonder that she was puzzled. She vented her feelings upon Bessie, whom she caught peeping from behind a baize door in the passage; and Ursule, meanwhile, ran merrily up the stairs to Madame's room.

Madame was divided between two feelings. Even when it was given her at her own request, she invariably treated solitude as an affront; and, until that offence had been acknowledged, it would not do for her to display any interest in Ursule's pro-

ceedings. On the other hand, she was thoroughly acquainted with Mrs. Chambers's social standing among her neighbours, and quite aware that Sarah infused a little extra respect into her tone when she announced that the carriage was waiting ; and, in fact, was as well pleased as Ursule, although for different reasons. Nevertheless, when the girl danced up to her sofa, bright and smiling, she looked so like her old self in the days when she used to quarrel defiantly with Madame, that the latter, who had never been so fond of her then as she was now, was seized with a sudden fear that the alteration was at an end, that she was no longer going to be submissive and gentle, that Mrs. Chambers had effected a transformation fatal to her peace.

She closed her eyes, and lay back upon the cushions with an air of suffering which went to Ursule's heart.

'Dear Madame !' she said, taking her hand quickly, 'you are in pain—you are worse !'

As she received no answer, beyond a shake of the head, Ursule became really frightened.

'Sarah shall come,' she said, hurrying towards the bell.

'Not that woman,' answered Madame d'Aurigny vigorously ; 'she understands nothing. She brings a bottle, which she says Madam Blunt gave to every one who was ill, and she stands over me, and expects me to drink it. Félicité had no nerves. Besides, child, I am not very much more ill than usual.'

'Oh, I am glad !' said Ursule, relieved.

'It is no wonder that the memory of my miseries becomes at times too oppressive. I am here, here in my old age, almost solitary. I have given up my country, my friends, the comforts of religion, everything, even to my very food, for your sake, child. Had it not been for my desire to advantage you by



taking you to my cousins at Rouen, I should not have been as I am. Were it not for your advancement in life, I should not now be mewed up in this gloomy, foggy England, where they cannot even build their walls thick enough to keep out the sea.'

Madame honestly believed herself to be a victim, and Ursule looked puzzled.

'Would you really go back again?' she said. 'Oh, how happy it would make me!'

'It is too late,' Madame said, solemnly. 'The journey would kill me.'

'There are your old rooms,' Ursule went on eagerly. '*Tenez*,' she said, producing a letter from her pocket, 'this is what dear old Madame says:—"Your rooms are empty, kept for you, my little one; no one else shall have them. We are quite miserable, Sanson and I, to think of your being made to live with those English; soon I shall be obliged to come and take you away. We all want you. The poor pigeons have not given up expecting you. I am obliged, in order to satisfy the creatures, to trot up all those weary stairs every morning, with crumbs in my pocket; the neighbours stop me, and ask, 'Our little Ursule, when does she arrive?' and what can I say? There is a stone in my heart when I think of you. Jules asks me to say that he has invented a sauce, the very queen of all sauces, and he has called it 'Sauce à l'Ursule.' It is quite a delicate little compliment, I assure you, as you will see when I send you the receipt. The oil, and the pepper, and all of which it is composed, represent qualities in your character. I did not know he had so much sentiment; but when he does speak, it is beautiful."'

Ursule laughed, with eyes full of tears, as she folded up the letter. Madame shuddered.

‘Those low people, the poultry-women and the fish-women, I suppose, call you “little Ursule”? Pray, burn that letter, or do not breathe a word of it to your English friends.’

‘But why not? I am not ashamed, Madame! They love me—those poor people.’

‘English ladies are proud, child; they would not tolerate you in their society, if they believed you had acquaintances of that sort.’

Ursule’s eyes flashed. ‘Do they not know that I am a poor girl in France?’

‘They know nothing about France; how should they? You are here under my protection—as Félicité’s heir. That is enough.’

‘Then I am here under false pretences, Madame! I will not remain so. If I stay in the country with these proud English, I will not forget my old self or my old friends. Oh, what are the new ones worth, that I should give up even old Nanette, the fish-woman, for them? Poor kind Louisette at the farm!’ added the girl, softening her voice, ‘you are not a lady either, I suppose? I wonder if ever I should be so wicked as to forget you?’

‘Do not be so excitable, Ursule,’ said Madame d’Aurigny, irritably. ‘No one wants you to forget them; but I suppose there is no particular reason for dragging them into the conversation, or for explaining that my friend Louisette lives at a farm-house and makes cheeses?’

For a few moments Ursule was silent.

‘No,’ she said, presently, in a low voice, ‘if you had not told me what you have, I might never have thought about it; but I cannot let them fancy me what I am not.’

‘You will not tell them!’ said Madame, with a little scream.

‘Why not? I am not ashamed,’ Ursule repeated again, steadily.

‘Oh, you dreadful child, you will kill me! Have I no claim upon you, after all I have suffered—for you, for you, do you understand? Do you wish to break my heart? Yes, you do; you wish me to die and be buried here, in this terrible country, and then you will send for old Nanette the fish-woman, and Jeanne, and Barbette, and live here with the friends you prefer. All my endeavours, all my patience, to teach you to be *comme il faut* to fail like this!’

But Ursule was firm—obstinate, stubborn, Madame said. The latter tried reproaches, coaxings, tears, in vain. She could not shake the girl’s resolution to make known her real position in life; she began to fear that even the sweeping out of her own room would be revealed. In despair at last, and from sheer exhaustion, she was obliged to cease; and then Ursule, troubled at her own hard-heartedness, devoted all her energies to amuse her, and to turn the subject. She described Mrs. Chambers for the twentieth time, the drive, the scenery; she painted the spot where Clement had risked his life, and, in glowing colours, the old fisherman’s account of his courage and steadfastness. Madame listened, and forgot her wrongs.

‘He is like my father,’ she said, enthusiastically; ‘as brave, only more determined.’

When the conversation showed signs of flagging, Ursule had lights brought her, and, fetching the newspaper, read until she saw that Madame was asleep, then went on in a low, murmuring voice for a few minutes, so as not too suddenly to break the spell. Madame was, as she seemed to be, asleep; but she had not been attending to the news of the day. Her last thought, with her eyes fixed upon Ursule’s slight figure, slender throat, and well-balanced head, had been,

‘She was beginning to make her way—that child; and now this folly will ruin all.’

And Ursule, looking into the fire, whispered to herself, as she put down the paper,

‘Oh, no! Mrs. Chambers has too kind a face to be so cruel!’

Bella had her wish. She drove to Ferncombe the next day, behind the pretty ponies, and side by side with Mrs. Chambers. It was very pleasant. The deep, narrow lanes were sheltered from cold winds; the hedges were scarcely less green than in summer, and what they lost in the vividness of one colour they gained in the bright scarlet berries and flaming leaves which flashed out from great holly bushes or straggling thorns. Hot tins for footstools; soft furs for wraps; overhead a cheerful, cloudless sun: she felt as if she must do her utmost to secure a continuance of such delights—as if less than ever could she endure to see others enjoying them at her cost.

It was not long before Mrs. Chambers began to speak of Ursule. She praised her face, her dress, her manner, said she hoped to see a great deal of her, and thought it must be a great pleasure to the sisters to have so charming a companion at the Cottage—the latter speech being good-naturedly intended to show that she thought they would do well to cultivate her acquaintance.

‘I have seen more of her than any of the others,’ said Bella; but then, dear Mrs. Chambers, I am not so old as they are, and perhaps—I don’t think Anne and Elsie would be unkind for the world; but, you see, she is so unaccustomed to society, they feel an awkwardness.’

‘I dare say they do,’ thought Mrs. Chambers, with an inward smile at any want of society-knowledge proving an impediment in intercourse with the Miss Follatons. ‘Don’t you suppose

then, Bella, that Mademoiselle Lafon has, in her way, seen as much of society as Anne and Elsie?' she asked aloud, a little contemptuously.

Bella turned round with a gesture of astonishment. 'Ursule Lafon?' she said. 'Why, you know who she was?'

'No. No great person, I dare say.'

'Why, she is nobody!' and finding that this startling designation did not annihilate Mrs. Chambers, Bella continued, 'She and her brother lived up in some horrid garret when Clement found them; and then the brother died, and she had no one to stay with, so Madame d'Aurigny brought her to England.'

'But Mrs. Blunt?' said Mrs. Chambers, a little staggered by this account, 'why did she leave her the Cottage?'

'Oh, because she is the grand-daughter of an old nurse or some one. You know how odd Mrs. Blunt always was.'

'Still—who is her father?'

'An artist, I believe.'

'Oh, well, that is better!'

'But only quite a low sort of man—a dreadful man, a scoundrel——'

'My dear Bella!'

'It is quite true: Clement was repeating it to Aunt Clare only a day or two ago. So, you see, she does not like us to be too intimate.'

'No, indeed!'

Mrs. Chambers began to think she had made a mistake. Unfortunately, in more than one of her sudden friendships this had been the case, and she had met with a good deal of raillery from her relations in consequence. She was not desirous to add to the list. She was anything but indifferent to the world's opinion, and, however she might have got over the garret and

the poverty, the disreputable father was more than she could forgive. Happily, she thought, matters had not gone very far. She would write a note to Mademoiselle Lafon, excuse herself from keeping the engagement, and let the promised intimacy drop. It was a pity not to be able to have her at her parties, but it would not do : people would not stand it.

‘It’s just as well to know those things,’ was her only comment, as they reached the top of a hill ; and the ponies dashed merrily on towards Ferncombe.

And Bella did not know whether she had succeeded or not.





## CHAPTER XVIII.

### MORE QUESTIONS THAN ONE.

Let not what I cannot have  
My cheer of mind destroy.

COLLEY CIBBER.



THE last traces of autumn, lingering long in those old Devonshire lanes, passed away. Christmas came and went. The new year opened with two or three weeks of such frost and snow as had not been experienced for many a year back. Instead of soft mud, the deep ruts in the lanes were iron-bound; snow covered up the ivy in the hollows of the hedges; the trees were mapped out with strange distinctness against the grey sky. Little blue-faced boys raced home from school, with hands in their pockets, and scarlet comforters round their necks; or indulged in vigorous slides upon the frozen way-side pools.

Bella had succeeded, and Mrs. Chambers had dropped Ursule. For days after the note postponing her promised drive, Ursule had waited and expected, and soothed Madame d'Aurigny with a hundred reasons for the delay; but, by-and-bye, when the pony-carriage dashed past her in the road without stopping, when neither note, nor invitation, nor sign of any kind came







*Clement at the Cottage.*

from the Hall, she understood that all her pleasant visions were to be put on one side and done with. It is very hard for those who are ready to believe that kindness will be perpetual to receive a check of this sort; and although Madame's conversation had, in some degree, prepared her for it, she was bitterly disappointed: perhaps she might have felt it even more, had not Madame's own vexation been extreme. Ursule was obliged to treat it lightly with her, to laugh it off, not to allow her to guess at her feelings, until by degrees she ceased to feel the sting herself. She had no shame about the matter—she had done nothing wrong: she put her pleasant little dreams upon the shelf, and made herself happy as best she could. When she met Mrs. Chambers, the latter had always a gracious smile and bow, which Ursule was soon able to return without one envious prick at the sight of Bella sitting triumphantly in her place of honour. Her disposition was too buoyant and too active for her solitary life to make her melancholy. Jock, with his great faithful eyes and rough caresses, was her constant companion when she was out of doors; at home she read, taught herself to draw with an ease and rapidity which astonished herself, knitted a shawl as large as a counterpane for Madame Sanson, read the newspaper to Madame d'Aurigny, and, in the evening, played *béziqne* untiringly. About Christmas, Clement came for a few days, and, whether he was smitten with compunction at the thought of his past harsh judgments, or whether the genial season affected him charitably, he was certainly kind to Ursule, took trouble to amuse her, and made her thoroughly happy. In Madame d'Aurigny's room—the bed curtained off by day, and the room made to look as bright and pretty as possible, she herself never so smiling and uncomplaining as before her nephew—the three made a cosier party than Ursule

had ever believed would have been possible ; and, on her part, she was careful to put no hindrances in the way. She said nothing to show that the Rectory sisters still held aloof ; she made no objection to go there ; she suffered no manifestations of dislike to appear. Clement thought with satisfaction that matters were improving, but he was not so blind as to believe that they had reached perfection. He still hankered after Joyce and her brisk genial influence, and, finding himself obliged to go to London in the midst of the severe weather above mentioned, he had little difficulty in obtaining a renewal of the invitation to Joyce in Miss Villars's most pressing words.

This time he was careful to specify the hour of his intended arrival ; but the snow had drifted so deeply over a portion of the line, and the rails were so slippery, that the train was long delayed, and it was quite dark before he drove up to New Terrace. Mr. Clayton came to the door to welcome him, and Mrs. Clayton waited, quietly happy, in the drawing-room ; but Joyce, generally foremost in her greeting, was not there, and his first inquiry was for her.

Mr. Clayton's pleasant face grew a little grave as he answered, 'Not in yet. I expect her presently.'

'Not in ? Why it is pitch dark ! Does she tramp about at this hour ?'

'She will not be alone ; Miss Foster's maid will walk home with her.'

'Is that the funny little old woman, who goes along sideways and weeps ? What has made Joyce take up with her ?'

'She has a little nephew with her, very ill.'

'Oh, I see ! Joyce is helping to nurse. Just like her.'

Mr. Clayton made no answer ; and Clement fancied something was not quite right. However, he had asked questions

enough for even his relationship with the house, and he yielded the next batch to Mrs. Clayton. They were very much the same as she had put to him in the summer—the ‘hows’ and the ‘wheres’ which attend family greetings—the growth of her nieces—the health of her brother ; but there was also a blank and a change : his mother gone, his home taken from him, his aunt and Mademoiselle Lafon installed there in his place. Mrs. Clayton hesitated and flushed ; but she could seldom keep back anything which had reached, as she said, the tip of her tongue, and she burst out, in spite of her husband’s warning glance,

‘My dear Clement, I know I ought not to say it, only it does seem so hard for you. That dear, pretty, old Cottage that you were so fond of ; and your mother of all people in the world ! It is so dreadfully hard !’

‘Thank you,’ said he, sitting down by her easy chair ; ‘but the hardship ought not to be one, at all events. For the sake of my profession, I could not have lived on at Elmwood alone ; and, after all, who is so proper a person to be there as my aunt ?’

‘But that designing girl !’

‘Poor Ursule !’ said Clement, sadly. ‘Among all her sins, that is a new one to lay to her charge. I think her worst enemy must acquit her of design in the matter ; and, if her own wishes were to be consulted, I begin to believe she would gladly throw the whole thing into the sea, and set off for her own country.’

‘Then let her restore it.’

Clement reddened. ‘You are dealing with impossibilities, Mrs. Clayton,’ he said.

‘Oh, you men are so high-flown !’ Mrs. Clayton had been roused into excitement, but with her it could not last long, and

in a moment or two she subsided into her usual placidity. 'Ah, well,' she said, 'I dare say the poor girl *is* out of her element.'

'As completely as a salamander in a trout stream ; or a trout among salamanders would perhaps be the better simile. Our minds are not quite made up whether she will bite, or whether we shall bite her.'

'An amiable community, upon my word,' said Mr. Clayton, laughing ; 'and a pleasant sort of Christmas you must all have spent together !'

'Delightfully seasonable, I assure you. And the long and the short of the matter,' continued Clement, becoming serious, 'is that we all think we should be the better for Joyce coming to see us, and—well, perhaps, shaking us all together until she has made us agree—wrung a little harmony out of us as if we were the harmonium class.'

'Joyce is looking exceedingly ill ; that is all I can say,' said Mrs. Clayton in an injured tone.

'Mr. Clayton, you must not say "no" this time.'

'I did not say "no" last time.'

'Well, then, you must say "yes." Where is Joyce ? I wish she would be quick and decide while I have you in the yielding mood.'

'I think I heard the door open. Yes ; that is her step.'

It was a very slow one, and unlike her usual mode of mounting the stairs, as her cousin could not help thinking, particularly when he was waiting for her after so long an absence. She came into the room, looking pale and weary ; and though her greeting was warm, it was spiritless, and made with something of an effort. As soon as she could, she turned to her father.

'Well, my dear ?' he asked.

'Just the same ; not the slightest change, that we can see.'

'The same delirium?'

'Yes—in and out. Perhaps the intervals of stupor are longer.'

'Shall I go again to-night?'

'No, thank you, papa,' she said, gratefully ; 'there is no occasion for it. You will only distress Miss Foster. She is very much shocked at the idea of your going out at such untimely hours.'

'And who sits up to-night?'

'Lydia : she is behaving admirably. That was another of my mistakes,' she said, sadly.

'Yes, Joyce,' said Mr. Clayton, gravely ; 'but, thank God, our mistakes are often overruled.'

'Papa, I wanted terribly to stay.'

'I never heard such an idea,' interposed her mother. 'And with Clement here, too!'

'What is the meaning of it all?' asked Mr. Blunt. 'Who is this little boy, in whom you are so much interested?'

Joyce was silent. Her father answered for her.

'He is a little nephew of Miss Foster. His father and mother are in India ; and this child was put under her care. She sent him to school, and, while there, he was seized with what seems to be a sort of low nervous fever. Of course, the responsibility adds tenfold to the anxiety.'

'Of course, poor little fellow ! But, Joyce, you are not to be turned into a parish nurse. Do you know what I have come prepared to do?'

'No.'

'To carry you back to Elmwood. Hallo !' as he caught the startled glance at her father, and the imploring expression of her countenance. 'Won't you come?'

‘My dear Joyce, it will be the best possible thing for you. I shall insist upon it,’ said Mrs. Clayton, with unwonted determination.

‘Not now ; pray, not yet,’ faltered Joyce.

‘Yes, indeed. We have quite as much work cut out for you as even the most active mind can desire. You shall hear all about it by-and-bye. Meanwhile, I have obtained Mr. and Mrs. Clayton’s full leave and permission.’

‘Papa !’

‘I think it will be as well, Joyce. You are getting, as your mother says, terribly overwrought ; and Clement’s escort would be a good opportunity for your going to your uncle’s. It will not be for a week yet. We don’t mean to let him go before ; and there is no reason to suppose that you cannot then be spared.’

She made no answer ; and Clement wondered again what was the matter. The Joyce of old days would have argued and battled good-humouredly, but none the less determinedly, and would probably have carried the day. Mr. Clayton, however, seemed desirous to change the subject : he plunged into a political question, which he and Clement were able to discuss alone ; while Mrs. Clayton dozed peacefully in her easy chair, and Joyce worked at intervals, and at intervals let her work fall listlessly in her lap in a strange absent manner, still more unlike herself than all which Clement had noticed before.

In the morning, when he had exerted himself, much against the grain, to face the dark dreariness of a London winter morning, and to arrive down-stairs in time for the half-past eight o’clock breakfast, he met Joyce in the passage, just coming in—the same weary, restless look upon her face as had saddened it the preceding evening.

‘So early?’ he said, taking her hand kindly. ‘Joyce, your father is right; you are allowing yourself to be overwrought.’

‘You would not wonder, if you heard,’ she said, hurriedly.

‘Well, never mind; I won’t tease you. Where have you been?’

‘To Miss Foster’s.’

‘And the boy?’

‘No change. Let me go, Clement. There is the bell for prayers.’

He looked after her wonderingly. His bright, genial little cousin was sadly altered. For the first time he found himself comparing her with Ursule, and remembering, with a certain pleasure, the soft frank expression in the French girl’s eyes—her pretty caressing ways with Madame. He began to lose faith in Joyce’s power of helping them; and the two servants, coming up in obedience to the bell, found Mr. Blunt standing in a reverie, with his hand upon the handle of the dining-room door.

He secured Joyce after breakfast, although it seemed to him that she looked wistfully after her father as he left the house, and only remained in obedience to his ‘You will stay with Clement, my dear?’ Mrs. Clayton descended to the lower regions, and the cousins found themselves alone in the drawing-room.

The day was gloomy, and bitterly cold; grimy snow lay in cold corners, drifted against chimney-stacks or under door-steps—iron railings stood out in black severity before the houses they guarded—poor little dingy sparrows puffed out their feathers, and chirped forlornly over their miseries. Joyce shivered as she stood at the window, pressing her face against the glass, and watching her father’s tall figure as long



as he continued in sight. Clement felt half provoked at her absorption.

‘Ten o’clock,’ she said, looking at her watch. ‘Papa will just catch the doctor.’

‘What on earth makes you all so anxious about this child? There must be plenty of other boys ill in the district. Is he an especial favourite?’

‘He was not, particularly.’

‘Well, then, poor little Miss Foster—I rather think, Joyce, that you used to bully her.’

‘Yes,’ she said; and, to Clement’s amazement, he saw tears in his cousin’s brown eyes.

‘I—I beg your pardon,’ he began, confusedly, when she stopped him.

‘I don’t wonder you are puzzled; but I will tell you the story, and you will not be surprised at my anxiety. You know what papa said about little Harry. His father and mother are poor, and in India; and Miss Foster offered to take the entire charge of this boy—he came very soon after you were here in the summer—educate him, do everything for him, in fact. It was very noble of her; for she had to save and stint herself in every possible way, which it used to make me angry to see. I did not think it was fair that she should be saddled with such an expense. Then he was exceedingly troublesome, delicate as he was, indolent, and overbearing—not a bit what a boy of his age is generally like; altogether a dreadful care, and, I fancied, likely only to be more spoilt under Miss Foster’s training.’

‘Well, Joyce, I acknowledge the spirit of discipline does not appear to me to dwell in the folds of Miss Foster’s petticoats.’

‘No,’ she said, with a faint smile: ‘so I continually urged her to send him to school. I am sure I made her very un-

happy, because she thought him too delicate for it ; and yet—yet she distrusted her own judgment, and fancied I might be right ; so, between one thing and the other, she had no peace. She used to fall back upon the expense, say she could not afford it, and would not send him to a second-rate school. Then she wanted to try a tiny one close at hand, kept by two ladies ; but I thought that would be no better than home, and I went on persuading and entreating, until at last an old uncle came to see the boy, and vehemently applauded all I said, concluding with offering to pay half his school expenses.'

'Well ?' Clement asked kindly, guessing what was to follow.

'Well,' repeated Joyce, bitterly—'well, I had my way; and do you want to know what came of it? He went to school at Michaelmas: he was miserable, wretched; but I persuaded Miss Foster that it was no more than what every boy experienced. Finally, a week before the Christmas holidays, he broke down altogether. She went to fetch him, brought him home, and he has lain at death's door ever since. Oh, Clement, those Indian letters break my heart !'

'You suggested what you thought would have been the best thing?' he said, hesitatingly, wishing to comfort her.

'What I thought! Yes; that is just it. I would not rest until she had done what I thought best. And it was to me that the doctor said, the first day that he was called in, "Such a delicate boy, Miss Clayton, ought never to have been sent to school."'

'Poor Joyce !'

'Clement, one thing. Pray, pray, do not press my going back with you. My one, only comfort is to be on the spot—to do what I can !'

'Is there likely to be a change soon?'

‘We do not know. Yes, I suppose so. He cannot go on much longer as he is at present.’

She spoke in a tone of such utter wretchedness that Clement was shocked.

‘My dear,’ he said, ‘I don’t wonder at it; but you are working yourself into a morbid fancy that there is only a black side to be looked for—a very unwholesome, unwarrantable state of mind, let me tell you.’

‘You would feel as I do, if you saw Miss Foster.’

‘Well, Joyce, she is always, and at the best, a little depressing, to say the least of it.’

‘Please, don’t laugh at her. Her patience and her goodness have been something wonderful. If you knew how many times she has put me to shame!’

Mrs. Clayton came in, and the conversation dropped. Clement had business to occupy him throughout the day, and did not return to New Terrace until dark. He found them all in the drawing-room, and Joyce tried to talk about indifferent things, and to be cheerful, but with an evident effort, and want of her old facility for throwing herself heartily into whatever subject came uppermost, which it pained him to observe. He could see, too, that she was altered, and, as her mother said, looked ill; her bright healthy face was worn, and there were dark shadows under her eyes which he had never noticed there before. He said so to Mr. Clayton, when the gentlemen were alone after dinner.

‘Yes,’ said her father, gravely, ‘my poor little Joyce is having a sharp lesson. She has accepted it so thoroughly that I have great hope of its effect.’

‘How is the child to-day?’

‘It is almost impossible to say; but my own impression is a

little more favourable. The delirium and the restlessness seem to have passed away, and there is no longer that dim redness of the eyes which has hitherto been a marked feature. Still, he lies in a stupor, and of course there is very great danger of his not having strength to rally ; or another danger, of which Joyce is unconscious—that his brain may be affected.’

‘How much she feels it!’

‘If she were not Joyce, I should be inclined to say, too much ; but, even should the worst that she anticipates come to pass, hers is too active a mind to become morbid and self-worrying. It will dim her spirit for a time ; but I believe in any case this trial must end in good for her, were it only in teaching her to judge charitably, and not to despise what does not in all respects come up to her standard.’

‘While she is in such anxiety, it won’t do, I expect, for me to say much about taking her back to Elmwood. It would be cruel to drag her away.’

Mr. Clayton got up, and walked to the fire.

‘It would be better for her to go, cruel as it does seem, Clement. She is of no real use to Miss Foster, who has turned out a first-rate nurse ; and this continual running backwards and forwards does no good, although I confess I am not sufficiently stern to do more than check it. I am afraid she will not be a very comfortable visitor ; but I am sure she would benefit herself.’

‘Then I leave it in your hands, for Joyce would think me a traitor if I pressed it after what she said to me.’

‘And about yourself? Life in lodgings is but dreary work ; do you find it better than the rest of the world?’

‘I get on well enough ; but home life seems very enjoyable when one does get a peep of it—such home life as this, I mean, where you don’t shut out outer interests.’

Hum ! In London one can scarcely lay claim to that as a virtue.'

'The Rectory tribe are growing every year more clannish and narrow-minded. Just because poor Mademoiselle Lafon happens to be French, they avoid her as if she had the plague.'

'Is there anything about her to justify their treatment?'

'Nothing—nothing at all !' exclaimed Clement warmly. 'On the contrary, they would all be the better for her society,' continued he, with sublime forgetfulness of his original notions on the subject.

'Indeed?' said Mr. Clayton, smiling.

'Her conduct to my aunt is beyond praise.'

'Really!'

'I am quite sure you and Mrs. Clayton would like her.'

'I am quite sure we would try to do so,' Mr. Clayton said, earnestly. But Clement noticed neither the smile nor the earnestness: he was silent for many minutes; and when he looked up, it was to talk of quite a different matter.

That evening, when Mr. Clayton was alone with his wife, he said,

'Emily, I have a prophecy to make, of the kind after your own heart.'

'What? Is anything going to happen?'

'Remember that, so far, it has got no lower than the clouds; but there I see a shadow of Clement's forthcoming marriage——'

'Clement! With whom? Let me guess—Joyce?'

'Joyce!' exclaimed Mr. Clayton, startled out of his playfulness—'Joyce! My dear, are you dreaming?'

'They are very fond of each other, and I fancied——Well, if it is not she,' she said, a little disappointedly, 'who can it be? Elsie?'

'Stop a moment, wife. I can't get over that idea of yours

about Joyce. Surely you do not suppose for a moment that she——'

'Surely you do not mean to say this is the first time the idea has crossed your mind?'

'Indeed, it is.'

'Well, men are the strangest creatures! I have always felt it a possibility, with the two so much thrown together.'

'She has been a child.'

'I don't know,' said Mrs. Clayton, sighing; 'Joyce was never very young.'

'Still,' continued her husband, disturbed, 'it has been nothing more than an idea of yours?'

'No, no, nothing more: only when you talked of having guessed something, I fancied it must be this. Fond as I am of Clement, I am not sorry, on the whole, if it is not as I suspected; but, if not, who is it?'

'I don't know that I ought to blame you for unreasonable conclusions, when my own have such slight foundations; but, I confess, my suspicions point to Mademoiselle Lafon.'

'Mademoiselle Lafon!' exclaimed Mrs. Clayton, with a little scream of horror.

'Why not?'

'His letters—all their letters: nobody says anything nice of her; she must be altogether unsuited!'

'I don't know. They are vain men who marry their doubles, and I don't think Clement vain.'

'I can't believe it, said Mrs. Clayton, decidedly.

'When I began, I told you it was only in the clouds. Nobody is called upon to put faith in such shadowy possibilities.'

'A French girl!'

'Undoubtedly.'

‘Beneath him in birth!’

‘Decidedly.’

‘Well, to be sure, Clement is half French himself, and—after all, her father seems to be a good artist.’

Mr. Clayton smiled. He knew that his wife had turned the corner.

‘I don’t think any one has said actual harm of her?’

‘No, indeed.’

‘And, Reginald, don’t you see?—oh, that is delightful!—Clement has only to marry her to have his own back again.’

‘Right, O most far-seeing woman! Then, you give your consent?’

‘I think, really, it is the very best thing he can do. I never could bear to think of his being turned out of it, and that slice taken away from his income. It is *much* the best thing he can do.’

‘Only, remember, it is the vaguest dream, on no account to be alluded to.’

Mrs. Clayton nodded serenely, perfectly satisfied with the arrangement she saw before her. Her husband would have been less easy had he not believed his wife to have been misled by a feminine capacity for suggesting probable marriages. ‘Joyce!—pooh!’ he said to himself, half angrily. ‘If I thought there was a shadow of foundation for it, Elmwood is the last place she should visit. But it is impossible—absolutely impossible!’

Joyce received the news that she was to go very quietly. If she had pleaded very strongly, her father would have yielded; and she knew it. As it was, it went to his heart to see her eyes fill with tears—rare symptoms of emotion for her at any time—and to notice that she did not attempt to put aside his

decision. She could be very resolute when there was occasion for it, and her resolution now was not to seek her own will. It seemed to her as if she could scarcely endure to go away out of reach of Miss Foster's house, out of reach of the almost hourly bulletins which were both her comfort and her torture, and, at the first hint of such departure, she had cried out against it. But the very strength of the feeling made her fear it. Was she not reaping the fruit of that love of control, that desire that her own will should be followed, which had grown up with her since the time she had been a little child—grown with her growth, strengthened with her strength, and now, in its very fulfilment, had become its own punishment? All her plans—what were they but the craving for power? All her active usefulness—was it not sweet to her from the belief that no one else could carry it out as carefully, as thoroughly, as she? It swept over her as the conviction of a fault does sweep over us when we have shut our eyes to warnings, refused to take them home and look them in the face, and then suddenly awake to find the fault standing over us, full-grown, strong, and its own avenger.

There is a danger in all hours of reaction. 'To have a right judgment in all things' is the prayer we need especially to use when, in seeing the errors of the path we have trodden, we are inclined altogether to distrust the path, and to turn away from all that reminds us of our failures, even though it be from good itself. It is so in the history of nations, in the history of the Church, in the history of ourselves. Joyce longed to throw down her undertakings, and to leave all that she had begun in the hands of others; and it was well for her that her father was watching now, as he had been watching while she was unconscious, and was ready with good help when most she needed it. He said little, but she knew he sympathized with her, so that



she clung eagerly to any words of advice he let drop. He would not let her neglect her schools, her district, her singing-class, though her present inclination was to give them all up. But he thought within himself that it would be good for her to go away, so as to cause a break in the too great accumulation of duties she had heaped about her, believing that, when she came back, she might take up her home-life again, in a wiser and more humble spirit.

The long-continued frost at last gave place to a thaw, which, for a day or two, made London more wretched than ever. Moody skaters walked home disconsolately, one day, from the Serpentine, which showed unmistakable signs of returning to its ordinary condition; and from that time there was no return of frost, and February came in with a feeling in the air which just carried a suggestion of spring to people who were not too busy to notice it. Mr. Blunt was hardly one of these. He had been detained in town three or four days beyond the time originally proposed, and very heavily worked from morning till night. He had scarcely seen his cousins, except late in the evenings, when he was so thoroughly wearied out, that compassion obliged them to leave him to himself; and now, on the following morning, Joyce and he were to start by an early train for Elmwood.

That day, his work was pretty well concluded; he was able to leave home later, and to walk to Miss Foster's door with Joyce on his way

'You are getting thinner and thinner, upon my word!' he said, as they parted, looking in dismay at her pale face. 'What shall we do to you at Elmwood? Establish telegraphic communication with this house, I begin to think.'

'Perhaps, when I am gone, it will be better,' said his cousin, wearily.

‘I know very well that, if you were not too polite to say so, you would be wishing me at the Antipodes, for suggesting this departure.’

‘Well, Clement, then we are equal,’ she said, with a touch of her old spirit; ‘for I have certainly spoilt your visit, and now, I suppose, I shall spoil my own.’

‘Nonsense! Come, for once I will be a prophet, and foretell that you will hear better news this morning.’

She shook her head, opened the door, and went in; but Lydia’s face in the passage, and her first words, almost sent her back again, with the vain hope that her cousin’s quick steps had not carried him out of hearing.

‘Dr. Blake says so!’ Lydia said, between laughing and crying; ‘I heard him say so to Missus with my own ears. Why, he knows me quite well, Miss; and you’re not to go up, nor nobody, for he must be kept as quiet as can be.’

Joyce could not speak. She, who was generally never at a fault for a word—she, who was prompt and ready in all emergencies—could not so much as send a message to little Miss Foster. She felt as if a great stone were lifted off her heart. Never before had she known such a gush of joy and thankfulness as suddenly brightened her whole existence; but it seemed for a moment to make her dizzy, and, unseen by the little maid, she put out her hand and caught the banisters. That minute was a bond between them. Lydia had always felt that Miss Clayton disapproved of Miss Foster’s choice of a servant, and was inclined to be pert and reckless; but, through the long weary illness, her better qualities had been brought out. She was fond of the child, touched with her mistress’s sorrowful patience, and she nursed him with a devoted care which no one expected from her, and which was unwearying.

Long ago, Joyce had forgiven her ; but Lydia still nourished a dislike against Miss Clayton until this morning, when the great joy of the household opened her heart, and over the little boy—given back to them at last, from the very gate of the grave—there could be no bitterness or remembrance of a fancied wrong.





## CHAPTER XIX.

### BREAKING THE ICE.

When duties unfulfilled remain,  
Or noble works are left unplanned,  
Or when great deeds cry out in vain  
On coward heart and trembling hand,—

Learn that each duty makes its claim  
Upon one soul : not each on all.  
How, if God speaks thy Brother's name,  
Dare thou make answer to the call?

Arouse him, then :—this is thy part :  
Show him the claim ; point out the need ;  
And nerve his arm, and cheer his heart ;  
Then stand aside, and say, 'God speed !'

ADELAIDE PROCTOR.

**T**HE train's come !' shrieked Rose triumphantly, rushing in to the school-room, where Miss Smith, Elsie, and Bella were going through certain studies from which she, as a junior, was exempted.

'Don't !' said Bella, crossly. 'You make my head ache.'

'And I may sit up late to-night, mayn't I, Miss Smith ?' continued Rose, trying to convert a doubt into a certainty.

'That depends upon what your aunt says.'

'Oh, that is why you make all this to-do !' said Bella.

'No, it isn't !' Rose exclaimed indignantly. 'I like Cousin Joyce, and I want to see her ; and so do you—only you pretend to be grand.'

'Hush, Rose ; you must not speak in that manner to your sister. Elsie, will you put aside the books ?'

Elsie obeyed in a pondering fashion, as if she were thinking of other things ; so that in her abstraction she carried off Bella's paint-box with the German dictionary, and caused her sister to exclaim that she was just like Anne. She was, in fact, very much taken up with the idea of Joyce's visit. Joyce was almost the only person she knew whom she could make up her mind she thoroughly liked : she admired her energy, her capable ways, her universal power of pleasing, and she believed her to be altogether honest—possessing, moreover, the merit of being one of themselves ; and if she did not exactly say this to herself in recapitulating Joyce's virtues, she certainly thought, with a sigh of relief, that she was thankful they were not preparing for a stranger.

Miss Villars and Anne had gone to the station to meet their guest. Elsie, released from the school-room, went round the house with, apparently, no better motive than poking fires, and giving her cousin's room its last touch, in the shape of a bunch of snowdrops, which she had rescued from their forlorn contemplation of a backward spring in the garden ; and then, when she heard voices in the hall, was seized with a fit of shyness, and dared not go down until there was a general outcry for 'Elsie ;' and Joyce was half-way up the stairs, scolding and kissing her in the same breath, before she knew where she was.

'Why did you not come to the station ?'

'I thought there were too many of us,' said Elsie, still shy, and looking at her cousin with a little wonder—Joyce seemed so womanly, and so thoroughly at her ease.

'Oh, dear, how tall you have all grown!' said the latter ruefully; 'even Bella has actually the presumption to overtop me! Where is my uncle?'

'In the study,' where an invading party found him absorbed in a comparison of two ancient authors, serenely unconscious of the hubbub of young voices in the hall.

Joyce—which is Joyce?' he said, looking round with bewilderment, as soon as he understood the state of the case.

'This one, papa,' Elsie said, mischievously, pushing forward Anne.

The temporary shyness soon wore off: there was a great deal to tell and hear on either side. London was a strange far-away world to the country girls; and Joyce, on the other hand, had so long been absent from Elmwood, that everything needed comment. Old Cato was dead, and in his place resided a sober middle-aged Draco, who was as conservative as his mistresses, and, not understanding Joyce's relationship, ignored her existence, and treated her with supreme indifference, which would not relax to so much as one friendly wag. But the changes were generally those of death or old age; Joyce could have declared that not a tree had been cut down, not a flower-bed altered, since the time when she was there before. There was the old Turkey carpet—only a little more faded; there were the same old-fashioned papers on the walls, the same uncomfortable sofa, the same chairs standing in the same place; the piano, rather the worse for wear; the solid-looking books, on which fifty years, more or less, would make but little impression: altogether an air of Eastern immutability rested upon the Elm-

wood surroundings, which made Joyce smile, and recall Elsie's indignation when, one day, she discovered a new housemaid altering the position of two large china jars.

'How quiet it seems here!' she said, when they had settled round the drawing-room fire.

'Very quiet and very dull, my dear, after London,' said Miss Villars, a little anxiously, not sharing fully her nieces' confidence in the superior charms of Elmwood. 'I hardly know how you will like such a change.'

'I? Oh, I can't tell you how much I shall like it! My eyes had begun to believe that it was necessary for everything to have a mixture of black.'

'But London must be delightful!' put in Bella.

'Oh, of course it has its advantages,' said Joyce carelessly; 'only perhaps fresh colouring can hardly be counted among them—especially at this time of the year. Clement says that, even where we are, we are losing our country complexions.'

'By the way, where is Clement?' inquired Elsie.

'I wanted him not to come beyond Defforton; but he insisted upon delivering me into safe custody, and now he has gone off for an hour to the Cottage. So, as he is there, I suppose there is no chance of my seeing Mademoiselle Lafon to-night.

The sisters looked at one another in surprise.

'To-night!' repeated Anne.

'No, I suppose not. You could not have asked her to come away. But I dare say she will be here early to-morrow. Of course, you see a great deal of her?'

I am afraid that as Joyce had been travelling all day with Clement, the question was a little malicious.

'Yes, of course—in and out,' said Bella, boldly. 'You know, the weather has been so bad lately.'

'It is not the weather!' exclaimed Elsie, looking indignantly at her sister; 'and we hardly see her at all. She is so different from everybody.'

'What a relief!' remarked Joyce. Elsie looked at her with amazement.

'Why, what do you mean?'

'Oh, don't you get tired of people just for the reason that they are all so much alike? But do you mean that you can't persuade her to come here?'

'I don't think we have tried very much,' acknowledged Anne. 'Don't you see, Joyce, she doesn't suit us.'

'I wonder whether I shall suit her,' Joyce said in a dreamy way, which made them all laugh. 'I dare say she will think me very stupid.'

'You, Joyce!'

'But I should like her to put up with me.'

'Joyce, she is French,' said Elsie, in despair.

'Yes; it is a comfort to think one's accent can be rubbed up a little.'

'She talks about being penetrated with gratitude,' interposed Rose, mimicking Ursule's voice.

'That is very kind of her, because such a scrap as you can't do much to make her obliged to you.'

'I don't do anything,' said Rose, straightforwardly. 'I don't know what you mean.'

'Oh, then it was the others, of course, that she meant. I beg your pardon, Rose.'

There was a dead silence. Joyce looked placidly into the fire, and the sisters uncomfortably at her. At last Anne began again, in an apologetic voice,

'You see, Joyce, unless people are likely to take to one



another in the end, it is so very hard to go through all the beginning part of it. I mean—I mean it is all up hill at first, and it doesn't seem worth while ; and Elsie and I do very well together——'

'Yes,' said her cousin, still gazing meditatively into the fire, 'it is very pleasant for you to be independent of other likings ; and I was thinking who Mademoiselle Lafon has ? Who is her friend ?'

Another silence.

'Poor child !' said kind-hearted Miss Villars, 'I don't really think she has anybody.'

'There was Mrs. Chambers,' faltered Anne.

'Mrs. Chambers ! Is she Mademoiselle Lafon's principal friend ?'

'No, indeed,' said Miss Villars, shaking her head. 'She was very much taken with her at first, and promised all sorts of things ; but she seems to have forgotten all about them. And poor old Madame d'Aurigny is quite miserable about it : she even wanted me to ask Mrs. Chambers the reason. I am sure I don't know—I hardly like doing such a thing.'

Even by the fire-light, Joyce, who was thinking how prettily it danced upon Bella's fair hair, wondered what brought the colour suddenly into her face.

'Then she does not seem to get very satisfactory companionship in that quarter ?' she said, when Miss Villars paused.

'To be sure—I cannot understand it ! Mrs. Chambers is not unkind, but thoughtless, certainly : it can be nothing else.'

'Papa always says it is nothing short of cruelty to raise a girl's expectations and hopes, and then dash them down, as people sometimes do.'

'Joyce,' said Anne, seriously, 'do you really mean to say that

you think we have been unkind to Mademoiselle Lafon? I wish you would tell us, and say what we ought to do?’

‘I? Oh, no, no!’ exclaimed Joyce, shrinking at the remembrance of the result of trying to force her own will upon other people. ‘I beg your pardon, Anne. I did not mean to find fault; I did not, indeed! Of course, not living here, I can be no judge; only, from being only one, perhaps I can understand better what it must be to go to a place and feel quite solitary and friendless.’

‘I did not think about its being any pleasure to her,’ said Anne, humbly; while Bella added, in a self-complacent voice,

‘I am sure I have done what I could. Of course, she is not quite up to the mark; but, being French, perhaps that doesn’t matter so much’—a speech which made Joyce go off into a fit of laughter, and beg that she might be furnished with Bella’s standard, that she might do her utmost not to fall short of it.

Miss Villars smiled lovingly at the young faces gathered about her. They were a continual care and responsibility—more so to her than would have been the case with a person of less anxious temperament—but she loved them none the less dearly. She thought what a pretty contrast was made by Joyce’s bright, keenly intelligent face and Elsie’s perfectly formed features and more dreamy expression; she listened with delight to their merry laughter, and the reminiscences of Joyce’s last visit, upon which the conversation had turned.

‘I hope old Jane Back has got over her persuasion that I am just the very moral of that dreadful red-haired grandson who was imprisoned for poaching.’

‘You should have heard old Thomas’s indignation!’

‘Poor old Thomas! How is he?’

‘He doesn’t work here now. The garden was too much for

him, so he just goes out now and then. He keeps the Cottage garden in order.'

'Do you remember, Elsie, when he was clipping the edges of that half-moon shaped bed, his standing over it in a meditative attitude, and at last coming out with, "I sim 't is by the pattern of moonshine"?''

'I never look at the bed without thinking of it.'

Mr. Follaton wandered in, and the conversation became general, as he seemed ready to bear a part in it, and to look at Joyce with a wondering, half-awakened consciousness that his little niece was no longer a child. He dearly loved argument; and although no match for him, Joyce was not so easily demolished as to be contemptible. She lived sufficiently in the world to be conversant with leading topics, and to know what clever men said about them; moreover, he discovered that, on the occasion of a famous debate to which he alluded, she had been in the House and heard a certain speech which had stirred men's minds even when it was but laid before them in print, and of which she was delighted to describe the thrilling impression when heard and enforced with all the added charm of a magnificent delivery.

Anne and Elsie listened and admired: Bella admired also, and took mental notes of points which it might be useful to repeat in conversation. Poor little Rose tried to enjoy the dignity of sitting up, in spite of sleepy yawns which would not be suppressed, until she fell fast asleep, and tumbled off her chair; and, for Joyce's sake, the evening was made to end at an early hour.

Elsie stood by the fire in her cousin's room while the latter unpacked.

'Anne is very uncomfortable about what you said of *Made-moiselle Lafon*,' she said. 'If you are right, we must have been all

wrong. But I don't see it, Joyce ; I don't see why we should have jumped into her arms, or that one is bound to like everybody.'

'Don't expect me to settle it. She has been here long enough for you to have found out what there is in her, and whether you have no points of agreement——'

'I am afraid,' said Elsie ruefully, 'that no one has tried to find out anything.'

'I suppose you have her occasionally to spend the evening?'

'Only once, when Clement was at the Cottage.'

'Nor to walk with you?'

Elsie made a face.

'Oh, well, we can have some grand walks together, and we will set to work to make her like us all.'

Joyce was very happy ; it seemed to her as if never in her life had she been so happy. The relief after the long strain, the weight lifted off her heart, was greater than she had ever believed possible. But, like a soldier who has once been surprised by a hidden foe, she felt as if no watchfulness could be too vigilant, as if every word and thought must be examined ; and now, after Elsie had left her that night, she thought over what she had said, and the motives for it all. She had learned better to know her heart. There was the wish to show kindness to Ursule ; with it lay the hope that Ursule would appreciate the contrast of her larger-hearted, more genial nature. There was the desire to do what would please Clement, shadowed by the belief that he would acknowledge the advantage of her influence. There was the pleasure of seeing her cousins do themselves justice, and the pleasure of having been the means of awakening them to a sense of what they should do. Ah, yes, every light had its shadow ! She had not conquered herself—that work was one which would fill a lifetime, would cost her

many a fierce struggle yet ; but she was finding out what she had to conquer, and there, by God's help, lay her good hope. Meanwhile, a difficulty met her at every turn—the inclination to give up something that she knew to be right, because it was surrounded with the snare to be pleased with her own share in it. For instance, Clement had confided to her the relative position of Ursule and her cousins, and asked her to use her influence with the latter to set things on a pleasanter footing. Joyce knew that she could do so, and all that had passed in conversation during the evening but assured her of it more entirely. When, however, she examined into her own motives, the discovery of what they were like disgusted her to such a degree, that she was inclined to punish herself by withdrawing altogether from the attempt. Yet that could not be right? She thought over it on her knees, and, with a sigh, she resolved that it must be wrong to let others suffer through her weakness ; that she would do what she could, would keep herself as much as possible out of sight, would watch, and pray, and battle against the love of government, the desire to be foremost, the wish to take the duties of others out of their hands, and, for the rest, would go steadily onwards, believing that He, who had shown her something of the secret springs of her own heart, would also guide her in her endeavours to bend them according to His will.

The next day was warm, soft, and damp ; the sea looked grey and hazy ; in the garden, rows of white crocuses bordered the beds with exquisitely curved, half-opened blossoms, and the little winter aconite peeped up in the shrubbery. Nothing would please Joyce but to read in the school-room until twelve, then to carry off Anne and Elsie to make the round of the garden, kitchen-garden and all ; and when she had satisfied

herself with a sight of all her old friends, she proposed going through the churchyard to the Cottage.

‘It is so early!’ said Elsie, with a groan; ‘besides which, you are the person to be called upon: you need not really go, Joyce.’

‘But I want to go!’

‘Only because you think you must. Look here—we ought to invite her to tea, I know. Aunt Clare shall write a little note, and ask her to come to-morrow evening. That will be doing the civil, and you need not trouble yourself about her to-day.’

‘Oh, Elsie, am I to suppose that I am afflicted with a cousin who does not really know the torments of feminine curiosity! I tell you that I want to see her, that I am longing to write a full description of her to my mother, and that only my politeness to you and Miss Smith has kept me from going an hour ago!’

‘Oh!’

‘Well, it is true. Besides which,’ continued Joyce, changing her tone, ‘it is rather a formidable thing for her to come into the midst of such a large party, with a strange cousin added to it, poor thing! Come along, Elsie.’

‘Oh, dear; and she will say all sorts of absurd literal translations, which always make me feel inclined to laugh.’

“‘Penetrated with gratitude,” and all that sort of thing, I suppose,’ said Joyce, a little contemptuously. ‘Really, Elsie, I should leave those wonders to Rose!’

‘Well,’ said Elsie, good-humouredly, ‘I see Anne screwing herself up to the effort, so there is no use in my fighting any longer. And there is always the hope that she may not be at home.’

‘Madame d’Aurigny will be rather terrific without her.’

‘Madame d’Aurigny!’ cried Anne, stopping.

‘Yes—is she not?’

‘Oh, Joyce, we never see her! Aunt Clare goes; but we never think of such a thing.’

‘How strange! You mean that she won’t see visitors? I fancied Clement described her as sociably inclined. At all events, I must ask whether she will admit me or not: papa would be vexed, unless I did so.’

‘And do you actually not mind it?’

‘Why, Anne, I shall begin to believe I am going into a nest of ogresses! Why should one mind?’

But Joyce received no answer. Elsie was half amused, half provoked; while Anne was awakening to a perception that her cousin took certain things into the range of duties which she had been accustomed to consider simply matters of choice, and her reflections lasted to the door of the Cottage.

Ursule, meanwhile, had been thinking not a little of her possible visitor. Clement had been there the evening before, and talked of her more than was judicious, and, it must be confessed, with the effect only of causing Ursule a slight heart-sinking, instead of exciting the pleasant anxiety for her acquaintance which he desired to arouse. She listened and smiled—she liked to listen to Mr. Blunt—as he descanted upon all Joyce’s merits, her usefulness, her cheerfulness, her talents, her readiness; but, in her heart, she felt a certainty that this was but another of those English *demoiselles* whom she began to dread to encounter, and, with a little sigh, she thought also that Mr. Blunt praised her very warmly—as if he liked her very much.

‘Shall I see her, I wonder?’ she said to herself. ‘Mr. Blunt thought his cousins would bring her here. I don’t think they will—not for many days, at all events, and then perhaps Bella will walk down with her.’

Then she found, to her astonishment, that Madame d'Aurigny quite expected to see Joyce at once.

'But certainly,' she explained, 'when I am almost an aunt ;' and, while she spoke, a ring sounded at the front door, and she became radiant over the fulfilment of her prognostications, desiring that the ladies, whoever they were, might be brought up at once.

Poor Anne ! By right of her position, she led the van ; and the old French lady could hardly resist a contemptuous shrug at all the sins against taste which made themselves manifest in her very entry into the room. She was so shy and frightened as to be almost speechless ; and her hat had an irresistible propensity to tilt slightly on one side, giving her a helpless expression which was comic in the extreme. Madame was pitiless. She considered both herself and Ursule to have been neglected by the Miss Follatons, and she looked up and down Anne with a little wondering air which was far from reassuring. But Joyce came briskly to the rescue. In her bright manner, which, if it was a little over-decided, was so genial that it always charmed, she made herself known to Madame d'Aurigny and Ursule, talked of her father and mother, and talked moreover as if they belonged to one another, instead of keeping them outside the limits of the circle which Ursule had begun to think was guarded by a very phalanx of thorns. She contrived, by an ingenious exercise of tact, to make her cousins take their share in the conversation, and actually to warm them into something like cordiality. She asked Anne for a receipt which would infallibly do good to a pain in the arm, of which Madame complained ; and led Elsie, before she knew what she was about, to offer Ursule some flower-seeds. Madame was delighted. Ursule looked wistfully at her, wondering whether this acquaintance



was to end like Mrs. Chambers's, or whether she could trust again; then she heard Clement's name mentioned, and listened eagerly to hear what Joyce said of him. Joyce, on her part, felt the same curiosity; and, after all, it was Madame d'Aurigny who said the most, and poured out voluble eulogiums upon him, interspersed with allusions to his conduct on the day of the storm, of which his cousin knew but little.

When at length they rose to go, something like a friendly footing seemed to be established between them.

'You will come often, will you not?' Madame said, in her most gracious tone.

'Yes, indeed; we are near neighbours enough for me to come very often, I hope. I will bring you my mother's photograph—let me see—to-morrow—Elsie, isn't there something to be done to-morrow?'

'We are to go to Defforton.'

'Oh, yes, of course! Mademoiselle Lafon, how do you like Defforton?'

Ursule shook her head in answer to the question. 'I? I have never been there.'

'Then you shall go,' thought Joyce, 'if I have to ask you myself point blank. But, oh, dear me! here I am again arranging everybody's business! Never mind; I will work round Anne, and keep in the back-ground myself.'

And she managed so judiciously, that Anne found herself almost unconsciously inviting Ursule to join their party on the following day. She hesitated, and would have refused, but that Madame interposed.

'Without doubt, you will go. It will be a refreshment to me to hear of something different from the hedges and ditches

which form your chief material for conversation. There are things, too, that I require ; yes—certainly, you will go.'

And, although the words were not kind, there was in her heart a certain satisfaction that Ursule should have pleasure.

Ursule could scarcely believe her senses when the visitors were gone, and she remembered all that had passed, and her own engagement for the next day. From resenting the sisters' coldness, she had grown to treat it as a matter of course, so that any attempt at cordiality came like a surprise. She laid it at Joyce's door, and she thought of Joyce with half-sad admiration. She was all that Mr. Blunt had described—a person to whom, throughout life, instinct would lead those who needed help to turn, and be sure that she would give it to the limit of her power. She was his favourite cousin—very fond of him, no doubt, very clever, highly educated. Ursule wondered if she could ever be like her ; then blamed herself for her own presumption. What was she but a poor ignorant girl, whom people in his country despised ? What was she ? and how could she have expected different treatment ? 'Oh, if I was back again with you, dear old friends !' said poor Ursule, stretching out her hands towards the sea. It was strange enough that her heart should have cried out in this manner just when she had received a little touch of kindness, especially as but the day before she had fancied that she was quite content to stay. It was one of those perverse crooks which sometimes take hold of people, and she felt quite ashamed of herself afterwards.

Bella chose to be one of the party in the Defforton expedition ; and Anne, always ready to give way, remained at home, as Miss Villars, Joyce, Elsie, Bella, and Ursule made a sufficiently large number without additions. They were to go by an early train, shop, take luncheon at Mr. Blunt's, and afterwards

attend the service at the old Abbey Church. Mr. Clayton wrote good reports of little Harry, and Joyce was in high spirits — bent especially upon Ursule's enjoyment, and upon baffling Bella's attempt to tyrannize over her aunt. Ursule had lost a great deal of her old daring light-heartedness, but every now and then it flashed out in genuine pleasure, and, with Miss Villars's kindly manner and Joyce's friendliness, the feeling of strangeness which generally seized upon her in the society of either Anne or Elsie was kept at bay. She liked the old town, with its quaint gabled houses, reminding her of Normandy; she was amused at the shops, and very glad of the opportunity of buying a few things to replenish her scanty wardrobe; and, perhaps, she was more pleased by seeing her father's sea-picture hanging in Clement's room than by anything else during the day.

Mr. Blunt was not there when they arrived, and the cousins turned over his books and pictures without compunction. Bella was taken up with the photograph-book, when, glancing up, she saw Joyce standing in rapt admiration before this picture.

'Mind you don't say anything about that,' she whispered, going up to her, and pretending to be still taken up with her book.

'Why not?' asked Joyce, with an instinctive dislike to Bella's mysteries.

'It would be very disagreeable for Ursule.'

'Disagreeable to Ursule? What do you mean?'

'Hush! she is looking at us now.'

'Well, why should she mind my admiring this picture?'

'Oh, Joyce, can't you guess? It was actually painted by her father.'

'Was it really? Then I am sure I shall go and tell her how beautiful it seems to me.'

‘Pray, don’t. I am certain she would be horrified.’

‘Oh, Bella!’ said Joyce, impatiently, ‘can’t you tell me straight out what you mean?’

‘Why, I mean that it would not be very pleasant for her that every one should know her father was a poor artist, when she has got into a different position here.’

This time Joyce stared in unfeigned amazement. ‘What are you talking about? Do you actually suppose that she would not be proud of it?’

‘Mrs. Chambers was shocked to hear it,’ said Bella, doggedly.

‘Was she?’

Bella felt Joyce’s keen eye full on her, and wished she had left matters alone. She nervously clasped and unclasped the book. ‘That sort of artist, you know. Of course, it is different in some cases.’

‘Thank you for the explanation. And you do not think Mademoiselle Lafon would like to be reminded of her family?’

‘No; I should think not—certainly not.’

‘Mademoiselle Lafon!’ said Joyce aloud, in her clear distinct voice, ‘Bella tells me that you have something to do with this picture.’

‘Ah, yes!’ said Ursule, smiling, although tears rose in her eyes; ‘it is my father’s painting. It is good of Mr. Blunt to have it here: you do not know how the sight of it brings home before me.’

‘How beautiful it is!’ said Elsie, touched, and looking kindly at Ursule.

‘I do not know whether it is his best,’ Ursule said, timidly; ‘but we always liked it the best. It seems as if it taught you the very secrets of the sea, and the hidden forces it contains. Every wave has its purpose.’

'Here is Clement,' announced Miss Villars, who had been sitting at the window looking out upon the old Abbey Church, black with age; and the fine elms round it, swelling with symptoms of spring, and just showing their red buds.

He came in hurriedly, apologizing for the delay, and not at first seeing his unexpected visitor. When he did catch sight of her, his first impulse was to give Joyce a grateful look. By-and-bye, when the greetings were over, he came up to her, and said in a whisper,

'Thank you *neartily*. I was sure you would do what you could.'

'Oh, the girls would be kind if they only knew how,' she said, as a sudden, disagreeable idea flashed through her mind. Could it be possible that he liked Ursule? Joyce felt a strange choking sensation in her throat: it seemed to her as if he was their own property—always belonging to them—and as if this fancy was unendurable. Certainly, she had promised to be kind to Ursule; but such a possibility had then never crossed her mind: now it flashed upon her as the explanation of many things he had said, perhaps unconscious of the workings of his own heart.

To Joyce, the brightness seemed to be taken out of the day. She smiled and chatted more vigorously than ever; but her thoughts kept reverting to what she believed was coming to pass, until she despised herself for her own weakness. Clement—Clement who had lived with them as one of themselves—Clement who, throughout her last trouble, had been so kind and sympathising—was it possible that her surmise was true? and if it was true, how could she bear the thought of it? She could not look at Ursule, she kept apart, and walked with Miss Villars to the afternoon service, hearing her soft voice purring

in her ear, and only every now and then obliged to answer in a monosyllable. Once in the church, the quiet soothed her. She was able to think more connectedly and justly. Ursule's life stood before her—the loneliness and want of interest which she had professed to pity; and she felt as if all that she had permitted herself to admit about her rose up in judgment against her selfishness. Perhaps, after all, it was but a girl's romance; yet there was something heroic in her earnest resolution—tearful, and made on her knees—to put herself on one side, and to think only of the happiness of others. Through the old painted windows streamed the western sun; up to the vaulted roof rose the sweet clear voices of the choristers; the massive pillars, the noble arches, with their grave depths of shade, stood as they had stood for long centuries; and, like all great things, whether of nature or art, which seem to us unchangeable—like the sea, fixed by an eternal decree—like the everlasting hills themselves, their influence calmed unquiet thoughts, put aside the little jars and frets of daily life, and lifted the soul into the region of immortality which God has given it for its own. Clement's love would have made the world very sweet to Joyce. She had never let herself acknowledge it before; but her thoughts had been unconsciously coloured by his influence, and she had grown to think of him as part of herself. There was a bitterness in the perception of this—a shame added to sorrow, which in another place might have made itself sting more sharply. The old church soothed her; ages spoke to her through the worn grey stones; earth seemed but a short journey—heaven near. What was her little trial to compare with those through which others had passed?—those which she had sometimes thought she was ready to encounter? Poor Joyce! There was a sharp struggle before her yet; but it was

well for her that it began with prayer, and met her where high thoughts came down to brace ; well for her that her winter's lesson had taught her not to shut her eyes, but to keep guard over an eager will, and try with an honest endeavour to bend it to the Divine teaching.

On their way to the station, Clement got hold of Joyce.

'How do you like her?' he said, eagerly.

He cared enough for Joyce to have great confidence in her judgment. She knew how sometimes a word of hers had raised or cast down something of which he was doubtful, and for an instant she paused. Very little had she seen of Ursule ; and it would have been enough to say so. Surely she was not called upon to assist actively in the erection of this fairy castle, of which she fancied she saw the foundations. The thought flashed across her, and then every generous impulse rose up and thrust it out.

'All that I have seen I like heartily, Clement,' she said, looking bravely into his face. 'I don't think you half know what a lonely life she must have had to lead this winter, or how well she bears it. I am sure I shall like her—sure !'





## CHAPTER XX.

### THE DINNER-PARTY.

*Beat.* Against my will, I am sent to bid you come in to dinner.

*Much Ado about Nothing.*

**I**N the little kitchen at the Cottage, as clean as two pair of hands could make it, Sarah and Bessie were holding counsel together, which, by their looks, was upon some weighty matter.

‘You’d better speak yourself,’ said the former, decidedly—‘there’s no cause why you shouldn’t; and you can say I’m willing to do the work while you’re spared to help your mother. Here’s a note come from the Rectory: you can take it up at the same time.’

But Bessie hung back. ‘I don’t like to,’ she said.

‘Bless the girl, and why not?’

‘I should be thinking of the time when I said I’d go. I don’t think she’d give me leave.’

‘Well, now, Bessie,’ said her aunt, ‘I don’t mind saying it was me that was wrong there. It did put me about to see Mr. Clement turned out, and strangers coming in; and I was so hurt, I couldn’t help saying what I didn’t ought. But, stranger or not, I will say that all this winter no one can have behaved better



than Miss Lafon ; and though I don't consider it would be becoming in me, being one of the old family, to take up violent with her, I should always speak well of her—that I say. I pity her too, poor young thing, here by herself ; and so lonely as she has been all this winter, and that old Madame with her ways and her whims at her continual. I won't say as she isn't fond of her all the time, and I know she complains of her not having no one to be about with. Oh, I can understand that much ! I know how pleased she was when Mrs. Chambers came here. But, Bessie, my dear, as you get older and wiser you'll learn that everybody can see the faults of others—the sweep never thinks his own soot can blacken ; and there Madame goes, crying out at other people, and all the while worriting worse herself.'

Having delivered herself of which moral reflection, Sarah took the note, and went up-stairs to ask leave for Bessie to go home and nurse a sick brother.

Ursule's decided conduct had gained her the old servant's respect, and, by little and little, her love. She had numberless prejudices to overcome ; but she rather pleased herself in the task of conquering them, and they were gradually melting away before the sunny smile which was Ursule's most irresistible auxiliary. She gave Bessie leave of absence, without any demur, and asked a great many questions about the boy who was ill ; and, not knowing whether she was doing right or wrong, or acting contrary to custom, inquired whether she might go and see him herself, to which Sarah graciously consented.

'What have you there, *petite ?*' asked Madame d'Aurigny.

'Only a little letter from the Rectory—a little letter in Miss Villars's writing. Oh, Madame, it is an invitation !'

'For what ?'

'It is to be on Tuesday. They have friends to take dinner with them, and ask me to come in the evening.'

Madame sighed.

'It will be delightful!' said Ursule, radiant with satisfaction. She had never been to a party, and longed to see what it was like.

Madame sighed again more deeply. 'That is the way,' she said: 'for you young people, nothing but gaieties and enjoyment; for us, pain, and loneliness, and all that there is of sad.'

'Do not say so, dear Madame,' said poor Ursule, smitten with compunction. 'I had not time to think: I will not go. I did not remember that you would have no one to play *béziqne* with you, or to read the newspaper. It is very good of Miss Villars; but I will not go.'

But Madame was satisfied when she made her self-sacrifice apparent. 'It is impossible for you to refuse such an invitation; it would not be *comme il faut*. I am accustomed to be set on one side.'

Ursule shook her head. 'I was foolish to dream of it; I have no dress,'

'Ah, bah! As if there were not one—two—three days before Tuesday! You are in mourning, requiring nothing more than a simple toilette: the materials may be procured by the carrier, and you will need little to outshine those *gauches* girls. *Ciel!* it is a malady so much as to look at that Miss Anne!—her hat here, her hair there. Such elbows! such a stoop! such a walk! Is she *imbécille*? Has she one idea?'

'Do you really think it is possible for me to go?' asked Ursule, eagerly, brightening again at the idea, and full of excitement. 'But you say yourself that you will be lonely?'

'I am always lonely,' replied Madame with dignity.

‘And I make no difference?’ said the girl, kneeling by her side, with a smile.

‘I do not say that. You are a good child ; you do your best,’ said Madame, after a little struggle with herself ; and Ursule clapped her hands merrily at the concession. But she drew back when Madame passed her hand over her hair : the action always brought a remembrance and a pang ; for it was Louis’ favourite caress, and she could not bear it from other hands. ‘You are a good child,’ continued Madame, graciously, ‘and I am grateful you are not Miss Anne.’

‘But she is very good,’ pleaded Ursule.

‘Whatever duties may be performed, there is one which no one has a right to neglect—the duty of pleasing others. Now, can it please me to have a hand thrust at me as if to knock me down? Can there be a pleasure in regarding a costume incongruous, inharmonious, offensive?—in conversing with a young lady who can neither convey an idea, nor answer beyond “Yes” and “No” to those with which I may present her? Certainly not,’ concluded Madame ; ‘and therefore I maintain that Miss Anne is culpable in the non-performance of her duties.’

Ursule could not help smiling. The description was exact. She knew too few of Anne’s sterling qualities to be ready to defend her ; and she was thinking anxiously of the dress which the carrier was to buy, and her own fingers manufacture. Madame was delighted at the new interest. She considered—in some respects truly—herself to have been the maker of Ursule’s fortunes. She was fond of contrasting her position in former days with that which she now enjoyed ; and she was presently absorbed in a discussion upon delicious shades and ravishing trimmings, among which it appeared as if instinct, not experience, taught her which the present mode preferred.

Joyce thought of everything. She was at the Cottage before the day was out, ostensibly with a newspaper for Madame d'Aurigny, in reality to see whether Ursule wanted anything which she could help her to supply. She found her in a state of so much enjoyment at the prospect before her, that she could not but think sadly how little she must have tasted during the long months spent at Elmwood. The very idea of novelty of any sort possessed as great a charm for the French girl as it made the misery of Anne and Elsie. She chatted away gaily of what she expected to see, and of the store of amusement she would be able to extract for Madame on her return. Joyce, who would have had little sympathy for such excitement in another girl, was very kind to her, and was able to reassure her as to the propriety of the dress she designed wearing on the occasion ; for Ursule had not full confidence in Madame's discretion, and needed a little experience to assist her innate good taste.

'How good you are to me, Mademoiselle,' she said gratefully.

'Ursule, I shall be very angry if you call me Mademoiselle any longer.'

Ursule smiled and blushed.

'You have troubled yourself so much about me ! Everything seems brighter since you came to Elmwood.'

'My cousins are a little stiff and difficult to understand at first. They are the best girls in the world, if you only knew them.'

'If !' said Ursule, with a shrug.

'You will do so in time. That coldness is nothing but manner.'

'So Mrs. Chambers said. But she was worse,' said the girl, sighing. 'She promised me things which she never did. Some-

times, do you know, I wonder whether you will turn away suddenly, like Mrs. Chambers.'

'I hope not !' Joyce said, hastily.

'She made the place quite different to me ; it was very pleasant, and poor Madame liked it too. We were to have done I don't know how many delightful things ; and then all at once—it stopped ! She should not have begun if she was not going on ; because,' said Ursule, colouring, 'I fancied that she liked me.'

'But did she say nothing ? Did you never hear an explanation ?'

'No, no ; not a word. Madame said that English ladies would not speak to me when they knew that in France I was not as I am here. Do you think it is so ? I would have told Mrs. Chambers the next time she came, but she never came again.'

'That horrid little Bella had something to do with it, I am certain,' thought Joyce. Aloud, she said cheerfully, 'Never mind ; things are sure to come right in the end. You have nothing to be ashamed of, Ursule.'

'I am not ashamed : it is not that ! Ah, if you only knew how much more dear the old life was than this ! *Tenez*, *Mademoiselle*, there was the house to begin with ; there was not a corner in it I did not love. You went into it, and thought you were going into just such another house as you would find in the street—we were in a street, you know ; and instead of that, there was a staircase, old—as old as if it had come out of the ark, and beautifully carved, with great broad steps, up which you ran, and overhead there was the blue sky and my dear pigeons. And in the little glass room at the foot of it there was good old Madame popping out her head to know what one was doing, and Monsieur—oh, so fat, and so content !—I have seen no one look as he did since we came to this England.'

She paused, and a little smile flickered over her face at the remembrance.

‘Those were old friends, and we are new,’ said Joyce, gently.

‘They were all old friends,’ said the girl, with a sigh. ‘Wherever one went, it was, “How goes it, Ursule?” “*Bon jour, petite!*” The very sun and the birds used to sing to me as they do not now. Do not think me ungrateful, Mademoiselle, because I feel a little like an exile. I have never said so to others: I have only told you that you might understand I could not be ashamed of my old life. Besides——’

She stopped, and Joyce asked, ‘Besides what?’

‘If I were ashamed of that, I should be ashamed of Louis,’ she said, in a low suppressed voice.

‘Your brother? Oh, no!’ warmly exclaimed Joyce.

Ursule looked quickly up, with a proud smile. ‘My Louis, no! I can never tell you what he was—how good, how patient, how holy! It seems to me as if God had sent him to show me what a beautiful life is like. And oh, Mademoiselle, if you knew what a blank there is without him! We were always one; we shared all our thoughts. Never, never, was there the least little tiny bit of quarrel between us; and you may think by that what he must have been, when I tried him so often—I was so impatient and wilful. Now, when I do not feel kind to poor Madame, when I forget how she suffers, and want my own way, I think of Louis, and often it stops me from being cross: I am not so bad as I might be, that is. And, do you know, still, when anything happens, I think, what will Louis say? and then it all comes over me, and I feel, oh, so lonely!’

‘Yes, I can understand,’ said Joyce, with tears in her eyes.

‘I can understand, you poor child!’ she thought; ‘and God

forbid that I, who have so many to care for me, should grudge you anything which He may have provided to make you happy again !’

Ursule’s heart opened to the sympathy she saw in the good, frank face before her.

‘He was so clever,’ she said. ‘I should like to show you what I have not shown to any one here—the little pictures he drew. May I get them?’

She ran out, and returned with them in her hands. ‘He pleased himself with the fancy this was like me,’ she said, tenderly, showing Joyce the graceful group of herself with the pigeons. ‘It was done for a surprise. Ah, how well I remember that day, when I told him of the June fêtes that were coming, and he took this from under the pillow to show me that he could work, like the rest of the world ! We were to do wonderful things, he and I, when he got strong, and made us rich—to go out together into the beautiful country, and see the peasants dance, and look in at the gates of old *chateaux*, and lie on the long grass under acacia-trees, and hear the birds singing in the sky. But they were all my dreams, not his : I know that now, when I look back ; and you see, Mademoiselle how they have ended.’

Tears stood in her eyes, and Joyce took her hand and kissed her.

‘Better things come to us than we dream,’ was all she could say.

‘Better things have come to him,’ Ursule said. ‘I have learnt not to wish him back again, and to be glad when I remember that he is spared what might have been hard for him to bear. And I see his face before me very often.’

Clement has told us how beautiful it was,’ answered Joyce, softly.

'Ah! Mr. Blunt was very good to him. He liked Louis, though he did not like me. He sat with him when I was away—the only time we ever separated, and it was so near the end!'

Joyce smiled a little. 'Did he not like you?' she said; and then she remembered that Clement's letters had implied something of the sort, and stammered, 'I beg your pardon.'

'No,' said Ursule, simply. 'Afterwards, too, he felt as if I had robbed him. Was it not unfortunate? Can you tell me what I ought to have done? There was no one to advise me; he would not take it back again. Madame wished to stay, so I stayed; but if you could persuade him—you are clever and good, and he would listen to you—if he would take it back, and let me go away. Why do you shake your head?'

'Clement would not listen; and he ought not. No, Ursule; if my father were here, I am sure he would tell you that all this has not come by your own seeking, and that you should not make yourself miserable about it; only try to do your best, and bear patiently what must be a trial. Put yourself in Clement's place: don't you see how impossible it would be for you to accept such a gift? One o'clock! I had no idea it was so late! I must go at once.'

Ursule looked gratefully after the small, alert figure, as it hurried along the road; but she did not know that the conversation had cost Joyce more than common sympathy, or had won her a faithful friend. The thoughts which battled in Joyce's heart had been very conflicting; now they were settling down into a steady renunciation of self. Pity for the lonely girl, who carried so brave a face through her troubles, would alone have been sufficient to appeal to her generous nature; added to it was a real liking, a wish to help her to the utmost of her power, and a strong desire to shake her cousins into a little display of



cordiality towards the innocent invader. But, somehow or other, she felt a conviction that Bella, with all her professed liking, was at the bottom of Mrs. Chambers's falling off. 'Silly little woman,' thought Joyce, contemptuously, 'to be influenced by a girl like that! I would not take any trouble in the matter—Ursule is better without her—if she did not evidently feel hurt, and if Madame d'Aurigny did not throw it in her teeth whenever she is affronted. And I dare say that, after all, Bella said nothing absolutely untrue—only put Ursule's belongings in the worst light. Well, we shall see.'

Tuesday came, the day of the dinner-party, and Joyce could not help feeling amused at the commotion created by the event. Even calm, unruffled Miss Villars went backwards and forwards between store-room and china-closet with unflagging persistency; and when the best dinner-set and the branch candlesticks had been carefully carried into the light of day, there were dried fruits glittering with candy, and luscious spoonfuls of guava jelly, and snowy piles of blanched almonds to be turned out in little heaps, into the middle of which, every now and then, Rose would make a foray, and go away with sticky fingers and the spoil, which Miss Villars had not the heart to refuse her darling.

'I like parties; and Cooper has promised me some jelly,' she announced, complacently.

'Oh, dear!' sighed Anne. 'This is one of the dreadful days of one's life.'

'Think of me, with the Miss Hamiltons to entertain in the drawing-room before you come up!' said Elsie, in a pathetic tone.

'Great bear, middle bear, and little bear!' soliloquised Joyce, mischievously.

‘That is all very fine for you, who don’t mind such things.’

‘But I do mind. I have just discovered there are seven bows to be made up for my dress, before I can wear it ; and if there is a thing I hate, it is making bows.’

‘By the way, Anne, you never sent for the ribbon that Aunt Clare said you wanted for your hair.’

‘What is the good? It does not matter in the least what I wear.’

‘Hear her ! Which of us can so afford to be independent of external improvements?’

Anne looked distressed. She never quite understood Joyce’s ways—how much was serious, and how much play.

‘You know I don’t mean that——’ she began.

‘That none of us can afford to inflict ourselves upon society unadorned, is what Joyce means,’ explained Elsie. ‘But I suppose I have an extra share of vanity ; for I am sure it would be a real pleasure to myself to feel nicely dressed. I like it, without thinking of other people.’

‘Oh, dear ! what is the difference?’ repeated Anne. ‘I cannot understand why one should care about the outward look of things.’

‘Love of beauty and want of perception of it,’ Joyce thought to herself.

‘Well, Anne,’ she said aloud, ‘I would rather live in Elsie’s world than yours. If you had the colouring of it, good-bye to everything but horrid drabs and browns.’

Anne looked shocked, this time. It seemed to her as if her cousin sometimes bordered on irreverence.

‘Oh, Joyce !’

And Joyce answered by taking her by the shoulders and bestowing one of those shakes with which she often longed to favour the whole Elmwood society.

The hours wore away, and brought Anne's ordeal nearer and nearer. Ursule, at the Cottage, stitched away at the dress which the carrier had brought, after a different fashion than Cinderella's fairy godmother; and Madame, from her sofa, watched, and scolded, and criticised. Clement, who was to dine and sleep at the Rectory, walked whistling to the station, thinking that it was always a pleasant thing to be going to an old home. Joyce hurried through her dressing, rushed into Anne's room, dragged down her hair, in spite of protestations, and twisted in some natural sprays of ivy with such good effect that Anne, looking in the glass in dismay, declared she did not know herself; and her cousin was obliged to deliver her into Elsie's charge, with orders to watch that she did not spoil it all by squeezing her head into its usual shape.

By-and-bye the guests began to arrive, Mr. Follaton, roused into a perception of his duties as host, receiving them all with an old-fashioned courtesy which was charming. Anne, even when supported by Joyce, was too little at ease to look anything but uncomfortable. Nevertheless, she managed to get through the hand-shakings without finding herself in trouble; and when she was able to take refuge in a corner, where no one in particular required talking to, Joyce felt tolerably satisfied about her.

The party was not really alarming—one or two of the neighbouring clergymen, with their wives and daughters, a naval captain and his son, and Mr. and Mrs. Chambers. As it happened, at dinner Joyce found herself sitting next to Clement; and his first question was about Ursule.

'I thought she was to be here,' he said.

'She is coming, with two or three others, in the evening. There were too many duty-debts to be paid off, for there to be



*Ursule at the Evening Party.*



room at dinner; and Miss Villars would not let me give up my place.'

'I should think not!'

'I wish she could have dined with us.'

'Then you like her?' Clement said, eagerly.

'Yes, indeed, very, very much;' and the words were spoken without any effort. 'Poor little thing! what a change these few months have made in her life!'

'Do you think she is reconciled to it?'

'Scarcely. France is still the sunshiny home, and this the one that is to be endured. But, if she could feel herself favoured with a little liking, it might be different. I am out of all patience with Mrs. Chambers.'

And then she told him the whole story. 'Mrs. Chambers could not have changed without some reason, however poor a one,' she said; 'and although I have not great foundations for my idea, I am inclined to suspect Bella of interference.'

'No, no; you are too hard upon Bella,' said Clement. 'What motive could she have had?'

'The motive of an underhand nature,' retorted Joyce. 'You don't expect me to read all its riddles, do you?'

'I should like to catch her at such work! But no, Joyce, you are putting it too strong.'

'We shall see.' With which oracular prophecy, in which she was apt to indulge, the subject dropped.

Upstairs, after dinner, they found Elsie, Bella, Ursule, and two or three other young ladies, who had been persuaded to come in a friendly way in the evening. Ursule looked very pretty and bright in her black dress, with nothing in her hair but the ribbon fillet tied daintily on one side, and her eyes sparkling with amusement at the girlish chatter round her. Joyce,

watching Mrs. Chambers, saw her glance towards her with admiration, and half move as if she was going to speak ; but Bella brought some work forward for her to see, and she contented herself with a bow. There was rather a wearisome time of ordinary chatter, looking at photograph-books, and an attempt and failure on the part of Miss Villars to provide two of the clergymen's wives with servants ; then the gentlemen came upstairs, and the conversation brightened. Mr. Blunt talked a great deal to Elsie ; but then, as Joyce noticed, Ursule was sitting very near, and he managed that she should not feel shut out.

Presently Elsie and Bella played a duet, and one of the Miss Hamiltons sang a song, of which the sentiments were not very intelligible ; and Joyce, looking at the timepiece, saw with despair that the evening was passing away, and she had done nothing—found out nothing about Mrs. Chambers and her fickleness. At last chance favoured her, or rather Mrs. Chambers herself. She rose up, and came over to the table where Joyce was standing, showing some curious foreign prints to Captain Bryce.

‘Miss Clayton,’ she said, ‘have Anne and Elsie infected you with unsociableness, that you have not yet found your way to the Hall?’

‘I scarcely knew whether you would remember me,’ said Joyce, frankly. ‘When may I come?’

‘Whenever you like. Will some morning suit you?’

‘I generally go to the Cottage in the morning. I am glad to see as much of Ursule as possible.’

Mrs. Chambers looked surprised. ‘Then your mother does not object?’ she said.

‘To what?’ asked Joyce, puzzled in her turn.

‘To your associating with Mademoiselle Lafon? Personally,’ she went on hurriedly—‘personally I admire her exceedingly. I thought her quite an acquisition to the neighbourhood; delightfully fresh and unconventional. I really hoped and intended to see a great deal of her. But then, when one heard that her father was so dreadful, and that altogether she was of such low origin that Miss Villars did not wish the girls to be intimate with her, what was one to do? I am not sufficiently superior to such prejudices as to go against them,’ she said, with a smile; ‘and I thought that really the best thing was to draw back at once. It surprised me to see her here to-night.’

‘May I inquire who gave you your information?’ said Joyce, feeling as if enlightenment was coming.

‘Bella told me about it. I forget what brought it out. Oh, I remember! It was by way of excuse for her sisters, when I accused them of not sufficiently cultivating Mademoiselle Lafon’s acquaintance. And then it struck me that she had never told me anything about her family. Naturally she was ashamed, poor girl; but, at the same time, her silence formed conclusive evidence.’

Mrs. Chambers paused, rather pleased with her own winding up. Joyce was too indignant to be careful over her words.

‘I am sure it did not,’ she said. ‘I beg your pardon—I mean that I think you are mistaken; she is not in the least ashamed of people knowing all about her. I am quite certain she would have been glad to have talked to you about her friends.’

‘Not if they were in a different rank of life from all of us.’

‘I doubt whether, until it was put into her head, she would have thought it mattered in the least.’

‘Depend upon it you are mistaken. That is a lesson soon learnt in the world.’



'She is thoroughly simple-minded and humble. All kindness she takes as pure kindness, without a thought of pretension to what she is not entitled.'

Mrs. Chambers still looked incredulous.

'May I try to prove it?' asked Joyce, smiling.

'Yes, do!'

Their conversation had been carried on in under-tones. Captain Bryce, in giving way to Mrs. Chambers, had turned to Ursule, who was talking to him with animation, and assisting her meaning with graceful gestures, which made the old sailor smile kindly into the pleasant face, thinking that it was one to brighten home, and that he would not object to his Charlie bringing home such another to the old place. But he was doomed to interruptions in his talk that night; for Joyce, as if she were taking up the thread which had been dropped, recalled his attention to the pictures.

'There are a good many of all sorts in this portfolio,' she said. 'Ursule, can you undo the knot? Some are good; others very much the reverse.'

She turned them over as she spoke; and one or two, who were attracted by the prospect of something to look at, came to enlarge the group at the table. Bella stood by Mrs. Chambers, watching with a little anxiety whether she spoke to Ursule. Clement also looked on curiously. Captain Bryce shook his head over a sea-piece.

'With the wind in that quarter, no sea could strike a vessel in such a fashion as this; but then, to be sure, there was never such rigging seen, except in a fancy picture.'

'This is a good painting, I believe,' said Joyce, taking up a soft, misty Scotch landscape; 'but, indeed, I am very ignorant about their respective merits. I only know which please my

fancy, and which do not. Ursule, you will be able to explain : come and take my place as show-woman.'

'Is Miss Lafon an artist?' asked Captain Bryce.

'How thoughtless of Joyce!' whispered Bella to Mrs. Chambers. 'She might have avoided such a question being asked.'

The whisper was loud, and it reached Ursule's ears as she passed behind them. A colour came into her cheeks ; but she stood upright by the table, and said in a distinct voice,

'I myself only draw a little ; but my father gained his bread by painting. He was a poor artist. It is not always easy to sell pictures, and they were our only support.'

Something resolute in the girl's manner struck those who were listening to her little explanation. 'By Jove!' said Mr. Chambers, leaning over his wife, 'she could not have said it more proudly if he had been president of the Academy!'

'Oh, artists are great people,' said good-natured Captain Bryce, afraid that he had brought annoyance on his little friend.

'But my father was not a great man,' gravely answered Ursule ; 'he was very poor. I would rather you understood,' she added, still standing by the table, and looking this time at Mrs. Chambers.

Clement rose up, and stood there too. 'If you like sea-pieces, Captain Bryce,' he said, 'come to my lodgings in Def-forton, and I'll show you a sea you won't find fault with, painted by Monsieur Lafon.'

'Go round and speak to her, Helen,' said Mr. Chambers, in an under-tone to his wife. 'I like the girl for saying that out, without humbug.'

One or two of the ladies had been a little shocked at the

scene, and at Ursule's straightforward speech, which they thought must have been very disagreeable to Miss Villars in her own house. But, as it happened, Miss Villars and Mr. Follaton were among the few people in the room who had heard nothing of what passed ; and when Mrs. Chambers went up to Ursule, and talked with more cordiality than she had shown to any one else that night, their opinions changed, and they agreed that, after all, her being French made a difference. And so it came to pass that on every side Ursule met with looks of satisfaction, and was treated something like a heroine. Clement stood by her ; and Joyce smiled when she met her eye ; and Elsie gave a gasp of pleasure at the honesty so congenial to her own character. Ursule did not understand it ; but she was not of a nature to pull her enjoyment to pieces : she accepted it as something very pleasant—more pleasant than ever, because, from what Madame had told her, she fancied that what she said would have turned people from her. On the contrary, her simple, unpretending manner captivated them, and under no other circumstances could the announcement have made so little impression.

Mrs. Chambers took Joyce aside just before she went away.

‘I was wrong ; but I don't mind,’ she said, with a laughing determination to have been in the right somehow. ‘I was sure she was nice from the first ; and you see Frank is quite delighted with her behaviour to-night. But do just tell me, what about the father ? Is he so dreadful ?’

‘He is idle, and neglected his children ; and that is all that I or anybody else here can tell you about him. I am confident of it, because I have asked Clement and Elsie.’

‘Then what did that child mean by leading me to suppose he was a thorough scamp ?’

Joyce shrugged her shoulders. She was very pitiless to Bella. 'It must have been a great exaggeration on her part, at all events,' she said.

'Horrid little thing!' exclaimed Mrs. Chambers, glad to lay the blame on other shoulders. And when she wished Bella good night, she said, 'Pray be more careful of what you say of people another time. You have thoroughly misled me about Mademoiselle Lafon.'

Miss Villars, Joyce, Elsie, Clement, Mr. Chambers, heard Bella grew crimson. She would have burst into tears, had she not been afraid of exciting still more attention. The inquiring looks fastened upon her made her feel ready to sink into the ground—she! who of all persons craved to please others, and be what she called popular. It was not the fault, but the publicity which distressed her, until she caught her aunt's sorrowful, questioning look, and then there came a rush of more wholesome shame. She went out of the room and up-stairs, avoiding Clement's indignant face and Ursule's unconscious remarks; while the others remained in the hall, seeing Ursule depart under Sarah's guardianship, and Clement walked out to open the gate. The girls lit their candles, and went away to their rooms, Anne in high delight that the dreaded evening was past. But when they wished their cousin good night, both cried out together,

'How pale you look!'

'I am very tired,' said Joyce, briefly. 'Good night.'





## CHAPTER XXI.

### PROVED.

I praise the instinct that can turn  
From vain pretence with proud disdain;  
Yet more I prize the simple heart,  
Paying credulity with pain.

ADELAIDE PROCTOR.



MISS VILLARS came to Joyce, after the Ash-Wednesday service, on the following day.  
'My dear,' she said, 'perhaps you can tell me what all this means? What made Mrs. Chambers speak so strangely to Bella? Her sisters say they do not know, and did not like to ask you last night, because you looked so tired; but I shall be so much obliged if you can tell me. I lay awake for hours last night, thinking of a hundred dreadful things.'

'Have you asked Bella herself?' inquired Joyce, reluctantly.

'That is what distresses me so much—I mean that she will not let me come near her. Nothing is so painful as that they should avoid me, as if they were afraid. I cannot bear to think that I may be over-severe.'

'Oh, dear! oh, dear!' groaned Joyce to herself; for poor

Miss Villars had tears in her eyes at the idea of her excessive strictness.

‘You have no conception of the immense responsibility which lies upon me in this position,’ she continued, talking to Joyce as if she were a much older person. ‘I fall into so many mistakes, which naturally make themselves felt upon the poor girls.’

‘I cannot help it,’ thought Joyce; ‘it is better she should know what her paragon Bella is like, than go on being deceived.’ And she told Miss Villars the whole story.

‘Oh, Joyce, there must have been some blunder! She must have heard a wrong story from some one. She likes Ursule so much; she would have been the last to have said anything which could do her harm!’ exclaimed Miss Villars, greatly distressed

‘Perhaps she likes Mrs. Chambers better,’ answered Joyce, thinking that, probably, she liked a little grandeur best of all.

‘Probably she misunderstood what I heard from Clement: very often I make mistakes. I am sure it can have been nothing but a misunderstanding.’

Her soft blue eyes were full of tears: she looked thoroughly shocked and upset; but it was more at the idea that Bella should have been suspected of deceit, than from admitting the possibility of her having acted in the manner they believed. Joyce felt herself to be in a false position, and pitied Miss Villars; but she thought her very weak, and she had little compassion for Bella.

‘She must have known that you did not discourage intimacy with Ursule, at all events.’

‘Of course, that was a mistake of Mrs. Chambers. My dear, we must set this right at once: the poor child cannot remain

under such an imputation. What shall I do? What will it be best to do for her?’

‘You must ask Mrs. Chambers, I suppose,’ answered Joyce, in despair of Bella’s being ever regarded as anything but a victim.

‘Thank you. Yes; that will certainly, under the circumstances, be the most straightforward course. I will go there, I think, to-morrow morning.’

‘And take Bella?’

‘Oh, I do not know. Is that advisable?’

‘You are the best judge, Miss Villars.’

‘My dear, it seems to me as if I could not judge in the case at all. The bare idea of her being supposed capable of such conduct is so exceedingly painful. Ought she to go?’

‘If she did not say it, don’t you think she would be glad to defend herself?’

‘Yes, indeed, poor dear! Then we will go together.’

When Miss Villars left her room, Joyce remained in a state of impatience. She was exceedingly clear-sighted; so much so, that it made her angry to see other people imposed upon; and she was very angry now. She had brought a prejudice against Bella with her to Elmwood; all that she had seen there confirmed it. This had put the finishing stroke; and now, instead of blame, Bella would be petted—almost turned into a suffering heroine by her aunt! Joyce stood at the window, and looked discontentedly over the garden, with its early spring flowers breaking out of the old-fashioned beds, and a glimmering silver line of sea bordering the meadows, and thought how much there was in the world which wanted setting to rights, and wondered how Mr. Follaton could endure the old high pews and worn-out paving in St. Mary’s. She was for going straight to the desired

goal, whatever that might be ; and any obstacles in the way could only be disposed of summarily—that is to say, unsparingly removed. Joyce had lately been fighting a battle with her own heart, and had, so far, won the victory ; but that very conquest made her inclined to be severe in judging others—inclined to grant them no favour which she had not permitted to herself. The world wanted setting to rights, and people were content to poke on with it all wrong !—that was the present verdict of her mind. No one had the energy to stand up and say that St. Mary's ought to be restored ; and no one would have the energy to make Bella feel how cruelly she had acted.

It was a little consolation, when Anne and Elsie came in, to find them agreed, at all events, upon the latter point. Elsie was as indignant as Joyce ; Anne indignant too, but more inclined to mercy.

‘She might have said it without thinking,’ she pleaded.

‘She must have known she was exaggerating.’

‘What makes it so horrid,’ said Elsie, ‘is that she really professed to be more friendly with Mademoiselle Lafon than any of us. I feel as if I should be ashamed to look her in the face.’

‘Miss Villars cannot believe it,’ said Joyce.

‘Can she not ? There, Anne, what did I tell you ? Aunt Clare will never listen to a word against Bella.’

‘I don't much think she will hear a word against any of you,’ Joyce responded.

‘No ; it is quite true. I am sure we don't get pulled up enough. I pull up Anne, which, you see, is a great advantage to her ; but as to the rest of the family, papa doesn't notice, and Aunt Clare thinks we must all be charming ; and so—I acknowledge, Joyce, a periodical visit from you is very advantageous to our morals.’



‘Thank you !’

‘Oh, I mean it, I assure you !’

‘I dare say ; only just now we were talking about Bella.’

Anne twisted herself uncomfortably on a chair. ‘If papa would only understand and speak, she would attend to him ; but if Aunt Clare does not believe it, he would think it was all a mistake. I am afraid that poor Bella has been giving way to small equivocations and deceits of late, until she scarcely knows what she does.’

‘Have you said anything to her?’

‘No ; she will not give me the opportunity : she just looks exceedingly hurt and offended, and before I can get it out she is gone.’

‘If I get the chance, I shall tell her my opinion,’ Joyce said, decidedly. ‘As to Ursule, did she not behave well last night ? She spoke out without an atom of false shame.’

‘Yes,’ answered Elsie, in a meditative tone ; ‘I think I am beginning to like her. I was grateful to her for taking two Miss Hamiltons off my hands.’

‘Then pray let your gratitude show itself. You owe her a great deal.’

‘On account of Bella ?’

‘On account of yourselves.’

‘What do you mean ?’ asked Elsie, impatiently.

‘A poor girl comes here as an utter stranger ; she knows nothing of the place, nothing of the people, nothing of so much as the most ordinary customs. She is young, very lonely, and has just gone through a great grief—circumstances which are generally supposed to require sympathy. Certainly, you have not thrown stones at her ; but I don’t fancy there is very much more to be said.’

‘Oh, Joyce!’

‘My dear Anne, isn’t it true?’

Anne was silent; Elsie tapped her foot on the ground.

‘Well, don’t let us talk about it any more,’ said Joyce, wearily.

‘I dare say it will all come right in the end.’

She felt as if it was hard that she must be always Ursule’s champion; she was worried with all of them—with herself more than all, because she could not shake off the longing to set things to rights—the old snare which had its mixture of good and evil, its difficulties of judgment, its ill-defined boundaries between what should be done and left undone. ‘Miss Villars is going to take Bella to Mrs. Chambers,’ she said, putting her jacket carefully into a drawer.

‘Then I think that is utterly ridiculous,’ said Elsie, vehemently, a bright colour flashing into her cheek. ‘It is bad enough, in all conscience, that she should have behaved in such a manner, without its being proclaimed to the world further than is necessary. Mrs. Chambers has been very silly about it in listening to Bella; and now I suppose she will take up Ursule, and be wonderfully affectionate, praise her to everybody, and say, in her way, as if she could make no mistakes, “I always liked her, but I was misinformed by Bella Clayton.” Isn’t it horrid that people should think we could have been so dishonourable?’

‘It isn’t that,’ said Anne, speaking eagerly, and letting her words tumble into a confused tangle—‘not about us, but about the deceit, the wrong-doing. Think if she will not care——’

‘She will care for the shame.’

‘Yes; but is that right? I mean,’ continued Anne, ‘it is only shame, after all.’

‘It is shame for us as well, and I do think Aunt Clare ought

not to make matters worse by going to Mrs. Chambers,' interrupted Elsie, her cheeks still aflame.

'I should think a decided punishment would have been better than all this trying to get out of a fact which has been proved,' said Joyce, forgetful that one of her aims had been to uphold Miss Villars's authority.

'It is just like Aunt Clare's indecision!'

Anne looked pained; she was not following the same train of thought as the others. Joyce was a little indignant that, having brought the matter to a crisis and made it clear to the feeblest perception, there should yet remain a doubt in favour of the culprit, and a desire for her escape. Elsie's pride was touched on a sore point—family credit. Her sister's fault was very great, and ought to be visited upon her; but it was hard that it should be visited in this way: she did not like it to be said that one of the Miss Follatons had behaved ungenerously. Self had a part in the meditations of both Elsie and Joyce; but, with Anne, there was only the sad, tender yearning over the sister whom her mother had charged her, when she lay upon her death-bed, with faint, loving words, to watch over and to guide. Anne cared little for the blame which might fall upon them, less for being proved in the right; but she cared deeply that Bella should see to what the fault she gave way to daily in small degrees would most assuredly lead her: she looked to the Beyond, while the others were taken up with the present; and though she felt the sin the most, she was also the most charitable to the sinner.

An uncomfortable silence fell upon the three cousins as each pursued their separate thought. Elsie wondered why they had gone into Joyce's room, and Joyce wished she might be left in peace for a little while.

‘Is Clement gone?’ she asked.

‘He went to the Cottage after service. He had scarcely time before the train started; but he seemed to think Madame d’Aurigny would be disappointed if she did not see him. Certainly he is an excellent nephew!’

‘Excellent!’ said Joyce, dryly.

Elsie looked at her in surprise. An hour ago the sad, solemn service had brought home to each of them high thoughts of better things—Elsie had longed to be more patient, and Joyce to be more humble—and now, it seemed as if the thoughts had flown, and they were left irritable and out of sorts. Each had a perception that it was so, and felt uneasy; and it was a relief when Miss Villars was heard calling her nieces, and they could separate for a little while.

The day dragged by heavily. Bella preserved an angry silence, inaccessible alike to Miss Villars’s more than usually kindness of manner, as if she desired to make up to her for the burden of an unjust accusation, and to the indignant looks of Joyce and Elsie. Towards the former she was simply ungracious; towards the latter, defiant. During the day she kept herself as closely as possible in the school-room; in the evening, she would not make any attempt to join in the conversation. Miss Villars could not tell whether she wished to see Mrs. Chambers or not: her ‘Dearest, we will go together, and then you can explain all that you wish,’ had been answered only by a short ‘Very well.’ On the next morning she looked pale and heavy-eyed, going about with the air of a victim, which it smote Miss Villars to notice. She could not do too much to show her entire faith in her truth; and Joyce impatiently wondered at her blindness, and took no pains to conceal her own opinion of Bella’s conduct.

About eleven o'clock the pair set out. They were alone ; but this was from no wish of Miss Villars : she would have liked all to be there, to hear Bella's justification. Singularly enough, she had not asked for it herself : she had put one simple question, and when it had been answered by Bella that it was all a mistake, she remained quite content, and confident in her darling. It was not suspicion which prevented her from being cheerful during the walk ; it was the girl's own gloominess, which she believed to proceed from the unjust things said of her, and only deserved to be charmed away by extra kindness and confidence. The morning was soft and genial : a hopeful whiff of spring came now and then in the air ; the birds sang, and chirped, and twittered, and busied themselves with all their little might in house-building ; the branches were thick and red with buds ; everything seemed to be putting forth its strength to escape from the bondage of winter.

Their way led by the Cottage gate—where Jock lay lazily blinking his eyes, and just acknowledging the rights of acquaintanceship by a feeble flap of his tail—and so on to the harbour, across the road where the sea had played such havoc, and little Phil Blake's life had been in sore peril. Now it was mended, the brown stream danced as merrily as ever down the meadows, and under the road, into the basin ; and the waters, which, for many weeks, lay like a broad lake within the embankment, had left it green again. Nothing marked the mischief of that great tide, except an uneven, rough patch of stones where the hole had been filled up.

'Oh, dear ! I shall never come here without thinking of Clement,' said Miss Villars.

Bella only sidled a little further off. She remembered Clement's look when she met him in the hall the preceding

night, and a flood of angry shame came over her at the recollection. She walked on sullenly, every step bringing a greater dread of what she was going to encounter ; and if any plausible excuse for escaping the ordeal could have presented itself, she would have grasped it eagerly. Her aunt's confidence touched her in spite of herself ; those soft, kindly eyes, with their burden of undoubting love, were more unbearable than the sharpest words of reproach. Sometimes it seemed impossible to go on ; she felt as if she must stop, confess that she had indeed said all that was attributed to her, and have done with it. But it was not the character of her mind to be brave, or to face boldly what might be postponed—what might by some unforeseen accident be set on one side altogether. Supposing that Mrs. Chambers were not at home ; then, at all events, the evil hour must be delayed ; and, while she was, for a time, spared general exposure, there was, moreover, a hope that the fuss would die away. Other things would assert their importance, and her fault be forgotten.

Silently, since Bella would not speak, aunt and niece made their way along a bleak, desolate road, bordered with salt-pools and patches of fleshy glasswort, until they turned upwards into a broad picturesque lane, so thickly set with trees that in the summer it was one long, unbroken glade, and, by a little gate, entered the Hall grounds. Up and up, as they went, the view became more beautiful, and, February as it was, it was like a summer picture to see the calm blue water between the trees, beyond a foreground of emerald-hued grass. Bella did not look up, but dragged one step after the other so slowly, that Miss Villars questioned her as to fatigue, and suggested asking Mrs. Chambers for a glass of wine.

‘Of course, my dear, it is satisfactory to you to come yourself ; but, at the same time, I am afraid you are over-tired.’

'I can't help it,' said Bella, in an aggrieved tone.

'No; it would be impossible for any of us to rest until this is set right; yet, at the same time, I don't know, I am sure—I almost wish——'

'What?'

'That no notice had been taken of it. My dear, Mrs. Chambers's acknowledgment will not add a straw to my convictions.'

As she spoke, she took the girl's hand, and looked kindly into her face. Bella shuddered, and withdrew her hand.

'Aunt Clare,' she began rapidly; then she stopped. She had been on the very verge of confession when her courage failed her. 'I wonder which is worse,' she thought, 'for papa to know all, or for me to encourage Aunt Clare's belief, and allow her to look at me in that trusting fashion.' She stood still momentarily by the side of a noble cedar, and glanced again at her aunt with a half-purpose. Then she laid it aside, and walked on. 'After all,' she said to herself, 'there are a hundred chances: she may be out, or in a good-humoured mood. I dare say I shall get out of the scrape somehow; and, then, won't I be careful to keep clear of such another for the future!'

Poor Bella! It was pitiful to see how all her trouble sprang from one source—the horror of being known to have spoken falsely. Over and over again she repeated to herself that, if this was passed over, she would be more particular—break off the habit, in short. And perhaps she flattered herself that this was repentance. It was certainly sorrow of a certain kind; and it contained a good resolution of a certain kind. But it was not repentance. She was angry with herself for having been imprudent; she was sorry that her imprudence had come back upon her; she was determined to be more heedful another

time. All this was not to repent. And the only time when something like a real perception of her fault swept over her was after one of her aunt's loving speeches. She half despised her for her perfect trust ; but it stung her deeply to think it was undeserved.

Mrs. Chambers was at home, and Bella's heart sank. The footman ushered them into a pretty south room, bright with every possible device to preserve its summer cheerfulness—sunny water-colours on the walls, fancifully flowered chintzes, bits of exquisite china scattered about, and a stand of glowing spring flowers, tulips, crocuses, and hyacinths, growing out of a deep bed of moss, and almost dazzling the eye with their gorgeousness. The room was empty, a brisk fire burning, a low arm-chair drawn near it, and a tiny Skye terrier ensconced in the chair. Bella stood by the table, nervously turning over the magazines heaped upon it, and wishing with all her heart that she had had sufficient courage to acknowledge the truth of what had been said, and escape the dreaded interview. Every moment she fancied she heard the rustle of a dress in the hall, and the five minutes during which Mrs. Chambers kept them waiting were the longest minutes Bella had ever passed in her life.

She came at last, full of apologies and graciousness to Miss Villars, and markedly chilling to her niece. Mrs. Chambers was not a person who easily forgot an offence, and, in this case, listening to Bella had brought upon her one of her husband's rare rebukes. He had been struck with Ursule's manner on the night of the party, had discussed it with his wife during their drive home, and had told her kindly but decidedly that she was silly to have been so easily swayed, and to have treated Ursule in so unjustifiable a manner. Mrs. Chambers had laid the blame on Bella, and was disposed to be indignant, and to



regard herself as much a victim as Ursule ; so that when Miss Villars, with a touch of quiet dignity which she could display at times, said that she had come as soon as possible to give Bella an opportunity for explanation, Mrs. Chambers, sinking into her low chair, and taking the dog on her lap, said coolly,

‘I am delighted to see you, Miss Villars ; but I scarcely see what remains to be explained.’

‘From what passed the other night, I am afraid you must have carried away a wrong impression of what my niece said with regard to Mademoiselle Lafon.’

‘Hardly a wrong impression : it was not capable of misconstruction.’

‘Surely,’ said Miss Villars, looking shocked, ‘you must have misconstrued it’ Bella, dear love, can you remember your exact words?’

‘I said——’

‘Yes, dear?’

‘I only said that Ursule’s father——’

‘Pray go on,’ observed Mrs. Chambers sarcastically, as she stopped a second time.

‘I am sure you said he was a very wicked man,’ said Bella, turning piteously to her aunt.

‘You informed me that he was a man so bad, such a *mauvais sujet*, in fact,’ remarked Mrs. Chambers, ‘that, added to the fact of Mademoiselle Lafon’s position in life being of the lowest, your aunt did not like you or your sisters to associate with her. You remember, I am sure.’

‘Bella,’ said Miss Villars, in great distress, ‘what could you have said to be so mistaken?’

‘Oh, it was no mistake, if that is what you fancy, dear Miss Villars. My memory never fails me, and I could repeat the

very words. Dear me, Bella,' continued Mrs. Chambers, who was very unsparing to other people's faults, 'why do you try to twist your meaning into anything else?'

'Tell us what it was, my dear child,' said Miss Villars, still looking at her.

She was silent. The brim of her hat hid her face from her aunt.

'What was it you meant to say?'

This time she looked up; an excuse trembled on her tongue, when she caught her aunt's yearning look of love: the words died away, she covered her face with her hands, and burst into tears.

'I wish—I wish she had never come here,' she sobbed out.

There was a dead silence. Mrs. Chambers felt uncomfortable, and occupied herself with the dog in her lap. She had some sort of perception of the shock it must be to Miss Villars, and avoided looking at her. Presently she heard one word uttered in the stillness—one word, full of sorrowing, pitying reproach—

'Bella!'

Only sobs answered. Mrs. Chambers, almost burying her face in her favourite's long hair, could see that Miss Villars had risen, and was standing near her, as if ready to go. She rose also, and tried to murmur something about being sorry; but the words died away, and Miss Villars spoke with all her old nervous trepidation.

'Pray forgive me—forgive us. I would not have intruded upon you at this hour had I known. I thought—I believed——'

'Pray—pray say nothing,' said Mrs. Chambers, much touched.

'I am grieved, indeed, to think of that poor girl having suffered through our means.'

'I was hasty also. I ought to have made further inquiries. Dear Miss Villars, do not blame yourself!'

'Ah, I must!' she said, with a sad shake of the head.

There was something in the gesture which made it impossible to answer. Mrs. Chambers could but press her hand, and wish Bella good-bye, for her aunt's sake, more kindly than she would have supposed possible a few minutes ago. Bella came away from the table, still sobbing; she neither looked up nor answered, and the pair walked drearily homewards. Miss Villars did not attempt to break the silence; but a whole string of reproaches would not have been so bitter as that one sorrowful exclamation. When they reached the Cottage gate, however, she stopped, and said in a low voice,

'Will you come with me?'

'Are you going in?' asked Bella, with a look of affright.

'My dear, I must. It is not right to allow Ursule to suppose that Mrs. Chambers behaved more unkindly than was the case.'

'You only think of the others!' said the girl, bitterly.

No one could tell what it cost Miss Villars to be firm; she dared not begin to argue; she only repeated, 'Will you come? It would be much better.'

'No, thank you. I am going home.'

Yet, ungraciously as she spoke, she wished all the time that she had sufficient courage to do as her aunt proposed.

Reaching home, she ran up-stairs to her room. Rose, hearing her pass the school-room door, exclaimed to that effect in the middle of a French verb.

'She will be here in a few minutes,' said Miss Smith, indifferently. 'Future tense, Rose?'

But as the minutes lengthened, she presently asked one of the sisters to call her.

‘You go, Joyce,’ whispered Elsie. ‘I don’t like it.’

Joyce was not sorry to go. She came into the school-room because her cousins wished to have her; but there was a restless, dissatisfied fit upon her which made it a labour to throw herself with any interest into their occupations. Moreover, she wanted to know the result of the morning expedition. When her knock at Bella’s door had been repeated several times without producing any response, she gently turned the handle and went in.

Bella was standing before the glass, drying her eyes. She did not look round as the door opened, but said angrily,

‘What do you want?’

‘Miss Smith is waiting for you. Shall I say you are not quite ready?’ asked Joyce, kindly; for she felt pity for the girl after what had evidently been a humiliating morning.

‘You need not say anything—no one told you to come in—I wish you would not meddle!’ cried out Bella, passionately. She believed her cousin to have been, in some inexplicable manner, the cause of all her disgrace.

‘That is childish,’ said Joyce, with coldness. ‘I don’t wish to meddle; but I suppose you do not expect me to be quite blind?’

‘I don’t care! You and Anne and Elsie are all set against me, and you try to set Aunt Clare and papa.’

Joyce smiled contemptuously. She thought it was a good time to bestow some home truths. ‘I tell you what, Bella,’ she said, ‘there is not the smallest use in your attempting to play injured innocence before me. Miss Villars is a hundred times too good to you; and if you have an atom of right feeling in you, you would know it. It was so mean, so ungenerous, to profess friendship for Ursule, and then to turn her friends against

her, that I don't wonder at your feeling ashamed—I don't wonder at your avoiding us all. I should be very sorry for you, if you were sorry yourself. But if you haven't even so much generosity as to acknowledge your fault, more shame for you!—that is all I can say.'

Bella cowered under her cousin's words. Joyce, as she stood there, with her little determined figure, her bright indignant eyes, her clear voice, seemed an unsparing accuser, looking into the offender's face, and reading all that she would have liked to keep most hidden. Her words were true, but they were very severe. In spite of her manner, in spite of her sullenness, Bella had been almost yielding: she had longed to pour out her heart to her aunt, to find comfort in the patient kindness which never failed her; and having seen her fault more clearly ever since she perceived how deeply it had grieved Miss Villars, she had thought that directly her aunt returned she would go to her and confess how wrongly she had acted. But Joyce's wrath hardened her again. Back came the angry, stubborn mood; back came the determination to carry it through with a high hand; back came all the foolish rage against herself for being found out—for not having managed better. She could not look Joyce in the face, for she had not sufficient courage; but she answered sharply,

'When you have finished, you can tell Miss Smith that I shall come when I please.'

And Joyce shut the door indignantly.





## CHAPTER XXII.

### CROSS PURPOSES

*Obe.* What hast thou done? thou hast mistaken quite.

*Midsummer Night's Dream.*

**I**N common with the majority of Devonshire country villages, the chief beauty of Elmwood came to it in the spring. The exquisite green that breaks into life, the marked yet harmonious contrast between it, the blue of sky and water, and the ruddy soil, possess a charm which no other season of the year can exceed. Ursule's first English spring, in spite of the bitter cold of January, was warm, soft, budding, and all that a spring should be to make it delightful; nor was ever any one more naturally fitted to enjoy it than the French girl, with her sparkling pleasure at everything that was pretty and bright.

With Jock by her side to look up at her now and then with sagacious, faithful eyes, with the sea before her breaking loudly upon the long line of sandy coast, with Joyce often at the cottage, and Elsie and Anne gradually thawing, her life had many enjoyments, brightening, as she fancied, with the spring. Madame d'Aurigny was more helpless, more suffering, than ever; but there were not wanting times when, in spite of herself, as it

seemed, she returned, in her own scantier measure, the girl's lavish affection ; and Ursule's nature was one of those in which dependence upon her of necessity produced tenderness. Nor could it be denied that the teaching of the past months, sad and severe as at the time it felt, had produced good fruit. Her life might have been that of a butterfly, carelessly content with the present hour, carried just where the stream of wilful self-pleasing would carry her, selfish in her happiness, fitful in her moods, vague and unreal in her dreams of better things. But forced back upon herself, and obliged for a time to remain in the shade, solitary and uncared for, the Divine love which, with unerring wisdom, fits the daily cross, had trained the nobler part of her character to answer to the call. It was not the capricious kindness of a thoughtless girl which now bore so patiently with Madame's ever-changing fancies ; it was not only the ignorant yearning after something high and beautiful which drew her to St. Mary's ; it was not fancy which induced her to study perseveringly, nor sadness which let her yield her will, nor forgetfulness which taught her contentment ; it was something beyond all these—the learning of the lesson taught unconsciously by Louis on his couch, and brought home to her in the little whitewashed room of the old Norman farm-house—the lesson of an everlasting Love.

For Joyce the girl had a sort of reverent affection, seldom bestowed upon one of so nearly the same age, although, indeed, Joyce was unfortunate enough to be a good deal older than her years, and, of late, more so than ever. But Ursule looked upon her with deep admiration, grateful for the manner in which straightforward common sense had pushed aside some of the thorns and difficulties gathering thickly in her path, and believing implicitly in her schemes, simply owing to unswerving faith

in a notion that all in which Joyce was interested must turn out a success. Anne and Elsie she tolerated, not daring to make advances towards intimacy, but rather inclined to like the younger sister, and shamefully alive to poor Anne's external short-comings. But for Joyce! Ursule thought with a sigh, free from any taint of jealousy, of her own mediocrity by her side; she was the sympathising confidante in Joyce's ardent, though imaginary, crusade against the high pews in St. Mary's—imaginary because even Joyce's courage was not equal to the task of arguing with Mr. Follaton upon the advantage of anything being changed, which could, by any possibility, remain as it had remained in long years past; while, as for hints, he took no more notice of them than if, as was very probably the case, he did not hear them. Therefore, though Joyce was not always inclined for the Cottage and Ursule, there was a tranquil satisfaction in feeling herself there believed in, looked up to, and accredited with large capacity of excellence.

As to Bella, neither Miss Villars nor Joyce could quite make out Ursule's feelings on the subject. She did not say much, neither did she show any great indignation; but she rather avoided the offender, and certainly sent no particularly friendly message. Naturally, she was not of a very forgiving nature, and it cost her a good deal to attempt to feel kindly in this case. Had the injury come from either of the other sisters, she would not have minded half so much; but Bella had professed to be fond of her—had gone so far as to kiss her—and she was inclined to look upon her conduct as treacherous, and to resent it. Always apt to judge others by their manner and professions, she could not believe how much of sterling good lay hid under Anne's and Elsie's rough coating of awkwardness and independence; while Bella's softer manner had inclined her to believe



that she was infinitely the superior of the sisters. There was a risk now that she would dislike them all, in spite of Joyce's endeavour to promote more kindly intercourse.

Madame d'Aurigny admired Joyce almost as much as Ursule admired her. Joyce thoroughly understood the art of amusing sick people without wearying them—of producing little subjects of interest, of remembering anecdotes, of being, in short, bright and cheerful, while, at the same time, never wanting in the charm of a sympathetic listener.

'Do you see! she keeps me inside the world,' said Madame, one day, praising her to Clement.

'Inside her heart, I suppose that means,' he answered, smiling and looking well pleased.

'She is so fresh!'

'Delightful!'

'Nothing gives her trouble.'

'That is because she is thoroughly unselfish.'

'As to those others, your cousins, bah!' said Madame, snapping her fingers contemptuously, 'not one of them can compare with her!'

'No,' replied Clement, a little hesitatingly, 'no, certainly; I do not think any of them can compare with her. However, I did not know that your opinion was so strong.'

'Do you expect me to proclaim it to her face? No, my nephew, I am too well versed in young girls to turn their heads by over-commendation.'

'And do you indeed like her?' asked Mr. Blunt, after a minute's pause.

'Have I not said so? I like her with all my heart.'

'So do I,' said he, in a suppressed voice.

Madame looked at him with her keen grey eyes. 'Ah!' she

exclaimed, with a little shrill cry, 'it is true, then ; it is as I guessed !'

'What have you guessed?' he asked, still in the same low voice, but a happy smile breaking round the corners of his mouth.

'That you would marry her. Yes, I am never mistaken. And you will really marry her ?'

'If she will marry me. Will she?'

'No question of that,' said Madame, a little bitterly. 'So this is the end ! I am too old to go away again, Clement.'

He took her hand kindly in his own. Her eyes were full of tears. 'I said all that to try you,' she added, in a broken voice — 'to know whether I had guessed rightly. Ah, but I knew it too well. You will not send me away ?'

'You do not think so ; you know us better !' he answered, moved with her emotion.

'A cross old woman !'

'The only being left that belonged to my mother. I shall be vexed with you presently, if you permit such fancies. I repeat, you ought to have proved us by this time.'

'She has behaved very well—oh yes !' said Madame, with a sigh. 'My poor Ursule !'

'Poor Ursule ?'

'Well, never mind. Does she know it ?'

'Not yet. I cannot tell her until I feel my way more securely. I have only your assurance that it must come right,' he said, getting up and pacing about the room.

'Well, well, so best—so best. Do not tell her too abruptly.'

'No, you are right ; I shall wait a little.'

'Let me break it to her first.'

'No, no,' he answered, quickly ; 'no one but myself shall do

that : I will have no third person interfere. However, do not be afraid ; you may be quite sure I will be careful.'

' Ah, yes ; that is very fine,' said Madame impatiently, as he closed the door behind him, ' that is very fine ; but what does he know of a girl's heart ? These men are like the ostrich, which thinks no one can see him because his own head is in the sand. Nevertheless, my poor little Ursule, I shall give thee a word of warning. I lie here on this sofa, but I am not blind. I can see the colour creep into your face, and hear your voice change when my nephew's step is in the passage ; and what does that mean but the one thing about which silly girls dream ? The world will never grow wiser. I shall do very well with that other ; she has merit, and will treat me with a proper respect. If Sarah lives with us, she will rule her better than Ursule ; and I shall insist that she bestows more attention upon the *bouilli*. Also, it will be a more *comme-il-faut* marriage for my nephew. Yes ; decidedly, he has acted with prudence. And yet I have the folly to think continually of my poor little Ursule : she will be left all alone. At any rate, she shall know. Yes, Monsieur Clement, whatever you may think on the subject, I am her natural guardian and protector, and I consider it my duty to inform her of your intentions.'

Ignorant of Madame's determination, Mr. Blunt, meanwhile, was inquiring of Sarah where Mademoiselle Lafon could be found, and received for answer the information that, Jock for her companion, she had started, as Sarah presumed, for the shore. He went hurriedly after her across the meadows ; but, as it happened, Sarah was mistaken in her supposition, for Ursule, when she got outside the gate, was seized with a fancy to go and see Bessie's little sick brother, whom once or twice before she had shyly ventured to visit ; and the cottage where

the Webbers lived lay, with one or two others, at the other end of a long deep lane.

As she went, she was glad that she had resisted the attraction of the sea. March was drawing to an end ; the trees were breaking into tiny leaves ; black ash buds had stolen out rather before their usual time ; primroses lay in thick clumps on grassy banks ; the hedges were green and soft with dewy depths of feathery moss, starred with lilac periwinkles ; violets looked up shyly from their leaves ; the delicate buds of the wood-sorrel were just beginning to show. Jock pattered along in the water which crept on at the foot of the hedge, and would fain have made his mistress share his delight and walk there too among the grass and the watercresses, but that she would not be persuaded. The air was scented with gorse. Standing still to look and listen, Ursule heard the distant tap of a woodpecker ; a squirrel ran along the fence which skirted a plantation ; two wrens called chit-chit to each other across the road. ' Everything is singing in its heart,' she said, and presently began to sing, too, a sailor's song which she had caught from hearing the fishermen sing it by the harbour—a song about stormy seas and wild winds, and the wives at home waiting and praying—as great a contrast as possible, it seemed, to the quiet peacefulness around her.

The lane was part of an old Roman road, and ran along for miles. As to the Webbers' cottage, that, and another by its side, stood in a spot where the road opened back a little, and so made space for the solitary houses. Ursule paused at the door of the first, with a shy reluctance to knock, which arose from her feeling herself still so much of a stranger at Elmwood, that she almost despaired of being welcome anywhere ; and Bessie's mother, though a sturdy, independent woman, was not one particularly easy of access. She was, however, on this

occasion in a softened mood, and, pleased by Ursule's visit, she invited her into the cottage, dusted a chair, and poured forth an account of all that the doctor had said about Nat, and the chances of his recovery.

'Would you like to see him, Miss? Miss Follaton is up with him; but that makes no difference.'

'Miss Follaton?' asked Ursule, in surprise. 'Is it Miss Elsie?'

'No, no; the eldest—Miss Anne. I can't tell you what she has done for him; she comes over all weathers—nothing seems a trouble—everything we've wanted she's helped us to; and as for Nat, he thinks all the world of her. She's a real good young lady; I don't know whatever the place would do without her.'

Ursule listened in amazement. This was the shy, awkward Anne, whom she had allowed herself to despise!

'It isn't one here and there, you see,' pursued Mrs. Webber, warming with the recital, 'but wherever there's trouble you'll find Miss Anne. When that poor old cross Mrs. Harvey scalded herself, and the neighbours would hardly go near her, she went on at them so; Miss Villars or Miss Anne was there every day, but Miss Anne the most; and I'm sure they've told me how she used to scold and rate, till 't was a wonder they had the patience to keep on going. Will you go up and see Nat, Miss?'

'I should not like to disturb Miss Follaton,' faltered Ursule.

'She's reading,' announced Mrs. Webber, opening a door at the foot of the steps to listen. 'Here, Miss, if you just go quietly up four or five steps, you won't interrupt them; and I should like you to see how comfortable Nat looks.'

Seeing there was no escape, she stole gently up the stairs and

looked in. Anne had her back to the door, and was reading in a soft voice the psalms for the day—

‘Like as a father pitieth his own children, even so is the Lord merciful unto them that fear Him.’

The boy’s eyes were closed, or he must have seen Ursule : she turned and went hastily down again, feeling as if her presence there were an intrusion.

‘How good she must be!’ she said, warmly, her eyes filling with tears.

‘Yes ; she’s a good young lady : it’s a pity there isn’t more like her,’ said the woman.

Ursule left a promise that Bessie should come up and see her brother that evening, and went away from the cottage and down the long lane, thinking, as she went, of Anne Follaton and her unobtrusive work. Always quick in impulse, she blamed herself for her judgment of one whom now she was ready to exalt into a heroine. The little incident added another warning against a too ready habit—perhaps a national habit exaggerated—to be content with no more than a surface-view of people and things. ‘I have laughed at her with Madame,’ thought she, penitently, ‘called her awkward, disagreeable, proud ; and all this time she has been going about doing the work of a saint!’ She looked round once or twice, hoping that Anne might overtake her, and no longer afraid of her brusque manner, for which she made a hundred excuses on the spot. But no Anne appeared. To tell the truth, she heard from Mrs. Webber of Ursule’s visit, and the horror of a walk *tête à tête* with her was so strong, that she went home by another lane, which took her a mile out of her way, but secured solitude.

‘Fancy having been obliged to walk back alone with Made-

moiselle Lafon !' she said to Elsie, when she reached home in a very weary condition.

'Yes,' said Elsie, hesitatingly. 'Yet I don't know ; I do begin to think she is nice.'

'Ah, you are clever, and I dare say you can get on with strange people,' said Anne, humbly ; 'but then I never can.'

Ursule, reaching home, found Madame d'Aurigny asleep, and, taking a book with her, went to sit, as she not infrequently did, in a corner of the green-house. She thought that probably Mr. Blunt had returned to Defforton, and was surprised presently to see him stalking across the grass.

'Sarah told me that I should find you here,' he said, coming in upon her with a bright eager face. 'I have been to the shore in search of you.'

'Have you?' she replied, colouring a little. 'I did not go there to-day ; I went through the lanes. I heard a great deal about your cousin, Miss Anne ; how good she is !'

'Who?—Anne?' he said, indifferently. 'Yes, I believe she is a good girl.'

'Very, very good ! I wish I were like her.'

'Do you? I don't.'

Ursule felt puzzled and a little uneasy. She tried to keep up the ball of conversation ; but Mr. Blunt seemed absent, answered shortly, and the frequent pauses became uncomfortable. Once or twice she fancied that something must have displeased him ; at other times she felt, with a sense of alarm, that he must be going to break something to her, so much did his manner remind her of the day when he told her about his mother's will. Once the question was on her tongue, but, glancing into his face, she caught his eyes fixed so earnestly upon her own that she could only look quickly away. What did he mean by that

strange expression? What made her heart beat so violently, and the colour flush into her cheek? She was half frightened, half angry, half happy, all without knowing why. She stood up at last, and said, with a valiant effort and trembling voice,

‘I must go. Madame, I dare say, is ready for her chocolate.’

‘No; she is not awake, and does not want you. You may as well stay out a little longer; for in ten minutes I must be off.’

‘Ten minutes!’ thought Ursule; ‘surely I can endure it for that time.’

‘I was going to speak to you about my aunt.’

‘Now it is coming,’ she thought again. ‘I was sure there was something to be told me.’

‘She is, as you know, very old, very feeble, very suffering, and very exacting,’ he added, with a smile.

‘I do not find her so now,’ said Ursule, simply, after a moment’s consideration, perceiving that he paused for an answer.

‘That is because your own kind heart will not suffer you to dwell upon it. Do you think that I have been quite blind all this time? that I am not aware of the trials you have had to endure—the patience, the love, you have poured forth freely? I can tell you now, although I tell you with shame, that once it was otherwise; that I did not believe—that, in short, I was a thick-headed fool! That’s the long and short of the matter, Ursule.’

‘No,’ she interrupted; ‘you only thought of me justly. You were right.’

‘Was I?’ he said, tenderly. ‘I think not. I think this winter has taught me many things, and has set that mistake right, at all events. What would have become of my poor aunt without you? You have cheered her life; you have devoted



your youth to a thankless nursing of one who had no real claim upon you, and have given up country, friends, all you cared for, to live in a place where, I am ashamed to say, you have met with neither kindness nor sympathy. You talk of Anne; what is Anne's life, compared to yours?'

His voice was agitated, and Ursule could not answer; she felt tears rush into her eyes—glad thankful tears, with a strange happiness at the bottom of them. For a minute or two there was perfect silence; suddenly Clement said,

'Do you remember the old farm?'

She gave him a quick look by way of reply.

'How I misjudged you then!' he said.

There was nothing to be answered to this; but presently she said, in a low voice,

'You made him very happy; he often said so afterwards. Do you know, I was so wicked and selfish, that I used to feel jealous?'

'I remember you were very quiet whenever you vouchsafed to stay in the room,' he said, with a smile.

'Last summer seems so long ago.'

'Poor child, you have had a good deal of winter since!'

'Not all winter,' she said, quickly. 'At first I thought it could be nothing else. After I lost Louis, the whole world seemed cold and bare; and then England! Oh, it all looked so sad, so gloomy!'

'But now?' he asked, with eagerness.

'Now,' she said, gently, 'it is growing into home.'

Mr. Blunt looked well content, although he said nothing more. Indeed, he had not a moment to lose, as he discovered to his dismay by hearing St. Mary's clock strike. He jumped up, wished Ursule a hurried good-bye, and was gone. But,

hurried though it was, there was a something in that farewell which, without her being able to explain it to herself, distinguished it from all other farewells. It left behind it a shy unacknowledged happiness. She lingered in the garden, wondering at the beauty of the spring flowers, the colour of the sky; and when she ventured to recall Clement's words at all, she fancied it was for the pleasure of reflecting that he, who was so wise and good, was pleased with her conduct towards Madame d'Aurigny. It was a very sweet reflection, to judge by her face lit up by a tender glow of delight. Her quick movements were subdued and softened; she went slowly into the house, and on the threshold turned to throw her arms round Jock.

'It is pleasant to have kindness, is it not, my friend?' she whispered in his ear. 'What would you like, in your turn? I will bring you a big handful of biscuits which will make you jump for joy. Do not fear; I will never forget you.'

Jock had no fear. He wagged his tail confidently, and with loving looks watched his mistress so long as she was in sight; when she was gone, the tail slackened, the ears drooped, and he trotted sadly off to the back regions, where the sympathy he was likely to meet with would not be so appreciative or satisfactory.

'Is that you at last, Ursule?' inquired Madame, as she heard the door open.

'Yes, Madame, it is I. I have not awakened you, have I?'

'I never sleep at this hour,' answered the old lady, indignantly. Then, changing her tone, she said gently, 'Come, and let me see you.'

'Here I am, Madame,' said Ursule, playfully, standing before her with clasped hands, glowing cheeks, and a smile on her lips. Madame d'Aurigny scrutinised her closely.

‘You look very happy, child!’ she said at last, with something of a sigh.

‘Do I! I think I am happy.’

‘Why, then?’

‘Why? Who knows? Why should I not be?’

‘No one is happy without a reason.’

‘No, certainly. But I have reasons.’

‘What?’

‘Well, to commence with, summer is coming.’

‘Go on.’

‘*Eh bien*, I do not know. The world looks smiling: it is not always so.’

‘I believe you are growing pretty, Ursule,’ said Madame, still watching her attentively.

‘Am I?’ she said, blushing. ‘How glad I am!’

‘Your skin is delicate, although it is brown; and if you could only manage always to show colour through it, it would be charming.’

Ursule laughed merrily; such compliments from Madame were very unusual.

‘Some one will soon be applying to me for your hand in marriage,’ continued Madame, gravely.

‘Oh, no!’ cried the girl, in a startled voice.

‘Why not? It is not good for you to live alone in the world. I should rejoice for it to be so, I assure you; for, although it is not *convenable* to talk to a young girl on such a subject, your position is different from other girls, and therefore I break through my rules.’

‘Dear Madame,’ said Ursule, touched with what seemed to be unselfish thought for her, and kneeling down at her side as she spoke, ‘do not speak of such a thing. Would you send me away from you?’

‘Ursule,’ said Madame, solemnly, ‘it is probable that my position will, before long, be changed ; that we may not continue to reside together in this dwelling, where, I am bound to say, you have behaved to me in a very proper and respectful manner. Believe me, I should not willingly quit you. No other inducement but the prospect of an establishment in my nephew’s house would have led me to consider the propriety of taking such a step.’

‘But,’ said Ursule, springing up in wonder—‘but I do not understand ! You are going away ; and to Monsieur Blunt ? ’

‘He has requested me to live with him.’

‘Surely, Madame, you do not like his rooms. You said you could not move into lodgings. You are going away !’

‘My nephew will no longer reside in apartments. I have not explained all to you ; and, indeed, you are to understand that no one but myself as yet is acquainted with his intentions. Very properly he has mentioned them to me, as his nearest relation, and therefore the first to be consulted on all matters of importance. He is about to make a change in his life ; he is going—pick up my handkerchief, child.’

‘Yes,’ said Ursule ; but she did not move. She stood motionless, with her eyes fixed upon Madame’s grey face.

‘It is as I knew,’ said the latter to herself. ‘Well, what was I saying ? Oh, about Clement. He is going to marry ; he has just informed me of it.’

‘Ah !’

‘You do not ask me to whom,’ said Madame, after a minute’s pause.

‘Perhaps he would rather I did not know,’ answered Ursule, in a low voice.

‘Perhaps,’ returned Madame, her conscience, to tell the

truth, a little smiting her. 'Nevertheless, I am the best judge of what should be known and what kept secret. He intends to marry his cousin Joyce.'

Ursule did not make any comment, or change her position. She still faced Madame steadily ; and the latter, who, in spite of her liking for the girl, loved still better the consciousness of her own penetration, became almost impatient for a sign to confirm it.

'Well,' she said, quickly, 'do you mean to say that you are not astonished ? I perceived it long ago ; but I did not suppose you had also guessed it.'

'I guessed nothing,' said Ursule, faintly.

'You like Joyce ?'

'Yes, yes, indeed ; I hope she will be very happy,' said the poor child, speaking with an effort. And then the colour rushed into her face. Why, oh, why had he said what he had said in the green-house ? Why had he wished her that farewell ? Surely it was not only mockery of her, it was treachery to Joyce. A bitter feeling of shame came over her as she stood there, unable, as it seemed, to move, and with Madame covertly watching her to make sure how the matter lay. Madame was really sorry, really interested : perhaps, of late years, in her desolate life, she had never felt so comparatively unselfish an interest in any one. Ursule had grown by degrees into her heart ; and, narrow though the chamber was, under her influence it, little by little, enlarged itself.

'Go down-stairs, child ; go out again, if you will,' she said, kindly. 'You look pale. I do not want anything ; and this is Monsieur le Chanoine's afternoon.'

Ursule needed no second bidding ; she went away down-stairs, glad to escape, glad to get out of the house. Not into the

garden—there she could not go,—but to her old refuge, the sea, that never-broken link between herself and her country. At the door, Jock, whose keen intelligence was never baffled, met her; and Ursule turned round, went deliberately up the passage-stairs again, to the biscuit-tin, and brought him out the handful she had promised.

‘There, my friend,’ she said, quietly, ‘you shall not be deceived.’

She walked quickly across the meadows, scarcely seeing the path for the hot tears in her eyes. ‘Madame is going to live with them, and I shall be left.’ For some time that was the only sentence that presented itself; by-and-bye, she went on passionately, ‘If I could only have respected him, it would not be so bad. I could be glad and thankful that he should be happy. But he had no right to speak as he spoke: it was wicked to Joyce, poor Joyce! Oh, he ought not to have done so: it was not good of him. And I have no one—no one to help me. I am only a poor girl, not knowing what to do, and always doing wrong. I ought to have come away at once, and not listened. What a good, true wife she will make him! Madame saw it long ago, she says; so that, had I but thought of it, I should have known it, too. They will marry, and Madame will live with them. As for me, who cares? At all events, then, I may go away from this black, terrible England, back to my own people. I never wish to see him again: how dare he speak so! Oh, you great, beautiful sea, will you go and tell them that I—poor little Ursule Lafon—am coming soon? Do not let them forget me; ask them to take me back again.’

She stretched out her arms to the grey waves, one after another coming on, and breaking into ranks of snowy foam. The sky was softly clouded; here and there great sea-birds swooped

into the water, and rose again, with shrill cries, to catch the light upon their white wings. Nothing calms human emotion like the sea—so grand that it dwarfs the troubles which encompass us; so beautiful, that it softens our hearts: it has kept unchanged the impress of its great Maker's hand; it continues the same as when, at the first creation, the waters above the firmament were separated from the waters below the firmament, and it was very good. It is a boundary which does not cramp us—ever varying, yet fixed by an eternal decree. It did now to Ursule as it has done to thousands of poor troubled men and women in all ages—as all God's works are intended to do—lifted her thoughts to a higher level. Jock, with his wise, wistful eyes, could not fathom the workings of his young mistress's mind. She did not herself know what influence it was that calmed her; but, standing there, the bitterness went out of her heart, and left her—distressed and uneasy, it is true, that the man to whom she had always looked up with a certain pride in his goodness and honour should have played a double part, but no longer feeling a sort of fierce rage that her own heart had been entrapped. 'How could I have permitted myself to dream such foolish dreams?' she asked herself, sadly. 'It must have been that I had no time to reflect, or I should have known how it must end. Oh, I pray, I pray they may be happy!' she exclaimed, clasping her hands, and saying the words aloud. 'And, for me, I will go back to the old house, to Madame Sanson. I will leave all that I have here behind me for them—all but you, Jock; and you and I will not part.'

Long and earnestly Ursule looked out over the great waters; and, as she looked, she thought that it might be she was called upon to live a grey life, unbrightened by much sunshine, uncheered by such rich colours as, at times, she had watched tint-

ing the whole face of sky and sea with their glorious hues. 'Like the sea now,' she pondered ; 'but yet the greyness has its own quiet loveliness, and perhaps the sunset will be the most beautiful hour of the day. Ah, my Louis, what a sunset came to you ! The day cannot be long ; and, while it lasts, I will not shut out the blessed sunshine, but I will try with all my might to look to the sunset at the end.'







## CHAPTER XXIII.

### THE WIND AND THE SUN.

Wouldst thou go forth to bless, be sure of thine own ground :  
Fix well thy centre first, then draw thy circles round.

*Archbishop Trench.*

‘ Elmwood Rectory,

‘ April —, 18—.

\* \* \* \* \*  
\* \* \* \* \*

‘ **W**HEN are you coming to fetch me? It is very unkind of you and mamma to be able to do without me for so long a time. If you don’t take care, I will punish you by not returning home at all. Really, papa, I want you dreadfully. It seems to me that certain good intentions have plunged me into a regular sea of mistakes, and I am sure I cannot give you any idea of them in a letter. I only know that I don’t see my way out of them; and the worst is that other people are affected by them. I suppose that always is the worst of one’s mistakes. I am thinking of applying to Uncle Lawrence—who, you know, is never so happy as when

he is routing out the contents of some wonderful old book which no one has looked into for the last hundred years—to find out for me whether, in the annals of astrology, there is any star which bestows upon those unfortunate enough to come under its influence the inclination to be for ever setting the world to rights. I have a theory that the old woman who went up on a broomstick was afflicted with this mania. Her desire to sweep cobwebs from the sky was no more than a development of the feeling—don't you see? But then I reflect that, if one carries on the idea, it is very difficult to know where to stop; because what is one to say about Don Quixote and all the grand old champions of romance? And that is exactly the difficulty I get into every day. There are so many things which, it seems to me, a little trouble would improve; but nobody appears to think of taking the trouble, and at last I make a remark which offends somebody, or hurts somebody, or afflicts somebody: it is quite horrid to think how often I do one or the other.

‘I told you in one of my letters that I did not like Bella at all. Anne and Elsie are dear, good, conscientious girls; but Bella I think very badly of. She is not true nor trustworthy; she is for ever putting a colouring upon words or things which does not really belong to them; and yet the tiresome part of the matter is, that dear, kind Miss Villars always believes in her, and spoils her thoroughly. Well, several weeks ago there was a regular fuss: it was found out that she had repeated something she had overheard about Ursule Lafon's father to Mrs. Chambers, and exaggerated it so much that Mrs. Chambers would have no more to say to Ursule until, at a dinner-party here, the right story came out. Of course, we were all very indignant—all except Miss Villars, and she actually

would not believe it until she had gone to Mrs. Chambers's and found it out beyond doubt ; and ever since that time, instead of giving Bella a punishment she would remember, she has done nothing but look sorrowfully at her, and has made no difference whatever in her treatment. You see, if Bella were a different sort of girl, she might feel her aunt's kindness, but she does not ; she only takes it sulkily, as if it were a right. I could not help letting her see what I thought ; but I acknowledge it has done no good : she has scarcely spoken to me since, and I only affronted her.

'Then there is Anne. She is so good, and so stupid. Stupid, I mean, about being shy and always keeping in the background, instead of taking her proper place. I really believe that some people think her half an idiot, just owing to her manner ; but it never seems to strike her own family that she might be different. She lets herself go about such an object. Her hair is always untidy, and her hat crooked, and her gowns more wonderfully ugly than I can tell you ; and it does provoke one to see her making the worst of herself, when one knows how excellent she is in all really important things. But when I tell her so, and try to rub up her dress, and make her think about her appearance, she only gets scared. I believe she is really growing afraid of me, and I am sure I wish I never said anything to her ; but, somehow or other, when I see her such an object, I can't keep my tongue still ; and if I make a joke of it, she does not understand, and it frightens her the more.

'And as to St. Mary's, I get into hot water whenever I go there, because I can't help seeing such hundreds of things that want to be altered. Really it is too much, Sunday after Sunday, to sit in great square pews, and have whitewashed gurgoyles staring down upon one. It might be so beautiful ; and actually

more than one person has spoken to Uncle Lawrence and offered money towards the restoration, and he has not the energy to undertake it. Perhaps that can't be helped ; but the provoking part of the business is that not one of the household but thinks it all quite perfect and as it should be, only just because it happens to be *their* St. Mary's. There is no getting their ideas out of the Elmwood groove. Such odd services as there were in Lent ! such hymns and, oh, such decorations at Easter ! I did work them up to a slight improvement about some points ; but there seemed to be no ideas beyond box and green things twisted together ; and the only special hymns they use are those at the end of the Prayer-Book.

' But then, papa, remarking all these things only makes me uncomfortable, and spoils the service ; and yet I can't help remarking them. Anne and Elsie and Miss Villars go to church, and heartily enter into the service, while I am seeing this and that, and wishing it were otherwise, and not spending my time half as profitably as they. And now, in looking back at what I have written, it seems very conceited. I wonder whether you will not shake your head over it, and think of little Harry Foster ? I think of him every day. I don't want to excuse myself. I cannot tell whether I am conceited or not ; but I know I find it dreadfully hard not to want to have things done, and not to be impatient.

' You must not believe this letter, if it grumbles ; for I am very happy here, and they are as kind as possible. Elsie, with all her oddities, is delightful, altogether honest and true-hearted. Only, you know, I have been away from you a long, long time, and I do want to get home. Besides, it is Easter week, and you promised to fetch me after Easter. My dear love to mamma, and tell her I have a lovely new flower waiting for me

to take to London. Please to write and say you are coming for

Your own affectionate Daughter,

‘JOYCE CLAYTON.

‘P.S.—They are building a new dissenting chapel in the village. We don’t think it will be supported; but meanwhile it is a “stony grief” for our eyes.’

Mr. Clayton laid down the letter with a smile and a sigh, then took it up and read it again, with the graver feeling predominating. It was very unusual for Joyce to discuss her own feelings; and he fancied that a tone of depression ran through the letter, also unlike his bright, brave-spirited little daughter. His meditations took shape in the following note:

‘MY DEAR CHILD,

‘Make up your mind to leave Elmwood on Saturday week. I hope to get down on Monday or Tuesday, when, so far, there appears to be a convenient blank in the week’s work. Then we will talk over what you have written. Now I will only say, remember, when you feel left to yourself and puzzled, that you have always within your reach better help than my best advice.

‘Your affectionate Father,

‘REGINALD CLAYTON.’

Joyce was not altogether mistaken in her idea of the effect she produced upon her two cousins. Anne was, in truth, afraid of her, in the midst of all her admiration. Joyce was eager and quick, and decided matters before Anne had half pondered them to her own satisfaction; and then the younger girl felt, with a sinking of the heart, her inferiority of judgment and

slowness. And, somehow or other, Joyce, in her attempts to—as she termed it—brush up Anne, contrived, quite unintentionally, to make her more conscious of her own defects; so that, actually, her presence was acting as a continual discouragement. Anne, always anxious and dissatisfied with herself, prized beyond their worth her cousin's powers. Her readiness of wit, her quick comprehension, her capability for accomplishing whatever she undertook—all these, and many other forms of cleverness, seemed to poor Anne wonderful possessions indeed, before which everything of her own sank deeper and deeper into insignificance. She had, moreover, always a difficulty in understanding a joke, and banter was a weapon against which she was utterly unable to defend herself. Consequently, as Joyce, on the contrary, loved nothing better than a little good-humoured quizzing, Anne passed moments of torment, at times actually painful, and scarcely to be understood, except by those whose temperament resembles hers. No one, but the sufferer, knows how a shaft of ridicule—sent, very likely, not from malice, but thoughtlessness—can wound one who lacks the power of light-hearted repartee. And Anne, with all her affection for her cousin, grew more silent, and awkward, and constrained every day.

With Bella there was more serious mischief. Throughout Lent—throughout the Great Week of sadness and stillness—throughout the rejoicings of Easter, Bella had held on her way, given no signs of sorrow, uttered no word of repentance. It seemed as if Joyce's words had simply hardened her, and brought out all the obstinacy of her disposition. She kept away from her sisters with a sullen reserve, which went to Anne's heart; she was more naughty and trying to little Miss Smith than she had been ever before. The governess actually dreaded to say what must be done, so certain was she to meet

with gloomy, grudging obedience at the best. To Joyce she never spoke.

And yet, in spite of all, Miss Villars was right in her unswerving belief that Bella was naughty because she was unhappy. Throughout those long weeks, her silent misery had been very great. She knew what days those were that went by, one by one, calling to her, with its message of loving sorrow—one by one passing for ever, with its opportunities of grace not to be recalled. When she awoke in the morning, she longed for night to come; yet the half-hour before she slept was the worst of all. She dreaded the services, because every word seemed to be meant for her, and over everything there hung the sense of withheld blessings. She was glad, on Easter Day, that she had not yet been confirmed, and that she could naturally come away with Rose. Even her father perceived that something was not right with her, and as—although slow to see in the first place—he had, every now and then, a marvellous power of drawing out right conclusions, Bella felt a sharp pang shoot through her at his remark. That he should know her fault was her greatest dread. She was very fond and very proud of her father. A word of praise from him she really valued; and when once or twice he had been angry, she had never forgotten his rebuke. It would have been far better for her had Miss Villars told him what all the others, except Rose, knew. She might, without fear, have left the love between father and child—the reverence on her side and the tenderness on his—to work the good it assuredly must have worked; but a mistaken desire to shield her darling, a yielding to what she felt to be Bella's mute entreaty, induced her to remain silent. Perhaps, all the time she hoped that each day would see the barrier broken down, which the girl had built up between herself and them, hoped for

a frank confession, and would not give up the hope ; although, as I have said, weeks went by, and still no sign of repentance came. No punishment had been inflicted, because Miss Villars held, perhaps rightly, that her own shame would be the severest punishment ; nevertheless, she suffered at least as much as Bella, when she found all her yearning kindness so baffled that it produced no result but the same apparent hardening against her. She reproached herself unsparingly for not having watched Bella's character more closely, so as to have detected the germs of deceit ; and it was, probably, natural and only to be expected that the whole business increased the nervous, almost morbid anxiety with which she regarded the four sisters.

And what would Bella not have given to acknowledge her fault ! Many and many a time, when she caught Miss Villars's anxious eyes upon her, the tears rushed into her own, and she was forced to turn away her head to conceal them. She had grown up among too good influences to be able to blind herself to her fault, and, indeed, she knew better than they all that it was neither one, nor two, nor three sins of that sort which she had need to remember, but numberless such—many which had drawn a word of indignation from Elsie, others so small as to be unknown to all but herself and God.

She was wretched, and she longed to say so ; but Joyce's words had hardened her against all. Nay, again and again, when her aunt's silent sorrow touched her almost beyond endurance, she had steeled herself into obstinacy by thinking of her cousin. The want of generosity, the almost treachery, were just the very faults for which Joyce could make the least allowance. Bella believed that she despised her, and perhaps, it was too true. But contempt is, at any time, only likely to arouse angry pride ; and pride having stubbornness for its favourite com-



panion, it is easy to understand how, by yielding to it, she was, day by day, fastening its chains more closely around herself, and, in bitterness of feeling against her cousin, was losing the precious hours of repentance.

Altogether, from one cause and another, a cloud seemed to rest over the place. Joyce was restless, and a little impatient of everybody, although keeping a sharp, unsparing guard over herself as well. She longed for her father to come, longed to go home; once there, there was little fear of her active habits permitting her to indulge in foolish discontent: but at Elmwood she had no fixed duties, and used to grow indignant when she found herself dreaming. Miss Villars's unhappiness revolved round Bella's, and, as no sign of softening appeared, she grew more and more sad. Anne was depressed. Mr. Follaton spent a good deal of time at Defforton, buried in the recesses of the Chapter library. Elsie began to wonder what had come over her world. At the Cottage, Ursule seemed only to have grown very quiet. She went softly up and down the stairs; she did not chatter away to Jock; she was more gentle than ever to Madame, and did her very utmost to amuse her; only, sometimes in the midst of talking she would fall into a long reverie, from which she did not soon arouse herself. Madame, glancing up at her, would comprehend, and remain silent. Never before had she been so interested—never taken so much thought for, absolutely restrained herself on account of, any person—as now for Ursule. The girl's patient self-denial had brought forth its fruit.

As to Clement, he seemed to be the most uneasy of all. When Easter came, it brought him to the Cottage, where Ursule resolutely kept out of his way, and, if she was forced into contact, was cold and impassive as he had never before seen

her. When she was not with Madame d'Aurigny, she shut herself into her own room, not even venturing upon a walk to the sea, lest she should by chance encounter him on the road.

Madame wondered whether any great step had been taken, and would have asked him without delay, but that she stood somewhat in awe of her nephew, and something in his face warned her off the subject. It was not until he was bidding her good-bye that she kept his hand in hers, and said,

‘Well, is there nothing for me to hear?’

‘Nothing,’ he said, withdrawing his hand, and his face clouding as he spoke.

‘But that is strange!’

‘Not more strange, perhaps, than that I should have been fool enough to think of it. You and I were both mistaken, I suppose.’

‘I am not often mistaken,’ said Madame, with dignity. ‘I affirm my opinion to have been right.’

Clement shook his head despondingly. ‘Not in this case.’

‘In this case.’

‘No; she cares nothing.’

‘Then give her up,’ said Madame, promptly, with a little sigh at the thought of the house in Defforton where she had pictured herself—‘give her up, and choose some one else. Whom shall we find?’

‘No one,’ said Mr. Blunt, with a sad smile. ‘If it is not she, it shall be no one else. No; I shall try my fate——’

‘It must be soon,’ interrupted Madame, thinking that Joyce would shortly be gone.

‘Yes; it shall be quickly, as you say. There is no good in hanging about in uncertainty. I would a hundred times

rather know the worst at once. It shall be when I come, next week.'

'Very well,' said Madame, sighing. 'And you wish me to live with you?'

'I should think so!' he replied, brightening up.

Madame fell into a meditation when her nephew had departed. She thought of the little household in Defforton, Clement attentive and thoughtful, Joyce bright, cheery, and the best of managers, her servants well-ordered, her *cuisine* attractive—a pleasant window, perhaps, where she could lie and watch the gaieties. For she had always been accustomed, since her married life, to live in a town; she loved society, and detested the country; and she believed that there would be in the sober, dull English county town as much enlivenment and stir as in her own bright, talkative Dieppe. It was very tempting. But then before her there rose up a little head of brown, wavy hair, eyes whose old laughter had grown wistful, a mouth sweet and patient, as if resolved to keep its sadness out of sight. Madame put up her hand to push the vision away, but still it haunted her. 'She could not live here by herself,' she said, impatiently; 'she will be very desolate. How much trouble these children give one! If I remain in this place, there will be no distraction; and at my age one requires it, though Heaven knows I am not unreasonable. But if I go away, Ursule must go too—back to those eternal Sansons. Well, and why not?'

Madame asked herself the question almost fiercely; and, before she had time to answer it, Ursule came in, having heard the door shut behind Mr. Blunt. She asked some question cheerfully; but Madame was not wanting in penetration—she saw that her cheeks were colourless, that she looked thin and weary.

‘Why do you not go out?’ she said, almost snappishly.

‘But why?’ asked Ursule, looking up in surprise. ‘You like me to be with you at this hour of the morning.’

‘That is a folly,’ answered Madame in the same tone. ‘You suppose that you are necessary to me, whereas you ought to know that I can do very well without you. I shall not be much longer with you.’

‘So I supposed,’ said Ursule in a low voice.

‘My nephew has been speaking to me again.’

Ursule did not reply, but she grew a little paler.

‘Nothing is yet settled; it will be, however, when he comes next week. Child, you cannot live here alone.’

‘Do you think I would!’ said the girl, lifting her head, and speaking rapidly. ‘Ah, no, no; when you leave me, I shall go back to France.’

‘But the Cottage?’

‘The Cottage?—he may have it; you may have it, if you will! What do I care!’ she exclaimed impetuously, tears rushing into her eyes.

‘And you will be alone.’

‘Yes, I shall be alone; but God will not let me be quite desolate.’

‘You are a brave girl,’ said Madame, looking at her admiringly.

‘Am I?’ Ursule smiled a little bitterly, thinking that, after all, it was well for her if she was brave.

‘Still, you might say that you are sorry to go away from me. It is not likely you will ever see me again.’

‘Ah!’ said the girl, throwing her arms round Madame’s neck, and sobbing, ‘do you not know that I am sorry? I had thought you had grown to love me—that we should always live together.’

All this has come upon me suddenly, until I scarcely feel like myself ; but you do not need me to tell you I am sorry !'

'Then, *petite*,' exclaimed Madame, suddenly, with tears running down her withered cheeks, 'do not go away ! After all, it would hurt my back terribly to make this other journey : you and I will live on together, and my nephew and his wife may do as they please for themselves. Do you hear me ? Are you content ?'

'Yes,' said Ursule, smiling brightly through her tears ; 'I am content that you are not pleased to send me away from you. But I must not be selfish ; for you will be more happy with Mr. Blunt, whom you love so dearly.'

'Bah ! He is but a man !' said Madame, with contempt ; 'besides which, he will be out all day, and it is not certain that she will understand me. I can be tranquil here, if only, child, you will persuade that terrible Sarah to vary her potatoes a little, and, if she will not permit me other vegetables, at all events to send them up not eternally *en robe de chambre*.'

'I will dress the potatoes myself,' cried Ursule, kissing her ; and in her heart there broke out a little triumphant glow of delight that, at last, again there was some one to love her and cling to her. She had felt desolate and deserted, poor child, during the past days, and not even the wish to return to France could balance the feeling. She went away, down-stairs, comforted ; and in the hall she met Elsie, coming to see her, for the first time, alone and unsupported, and bringing a pretty bunch of sweet flowers for an offering. Ursule did not know that the event had been brought to pass by a little wile of Joyce's ; but she was touched and pleased, and the ice, which had for some time past been melting, thawed rapidly when the two girls were left to themselves ; and Elsie found, to her surprise, that Ursule

was actually a being possessing very much the same tastes and likings as herself, and no longer divided by the barrier of an unfamiliar language.

They chatted, and Ursule walked back with her visitor ; and when they parted at the gate, it was with an engagement to meet again, and every promise of a budding friendship.





## CHAPTER XXIV.

WHAT JOYCE SAID.

Natures whose roots strike deep  
Clear their own way, and win to light in growing.

*The Lost Tales of Miletus.*

**A**PRIL converted the Elmwood lanes into absolute green bowers, in which the birds sang all day long, cuckoo and all, and ferns unfolded themselves out of little brown, furry sheaths, and snowy hawthorn peeped out before its time, and cows waded through deep grass pastures. All along the hedges, tiny leaflets, vivid and beautiful, ran over the red soil and covered it up ; exquisite trails of young ivy festooned themselves gracefully over the recesses—the caves, as Rose called them, where she expected, every day that she peeped into them, to find a little champion fairy, exquisitely caparisoned, and ready to go forth and tilt with all adverse parties in the world. She met with wonderful insects instead, who scuttled away as fast as they could into the shady depths of their homes, and set her wondering over their family history. And through the young flickering leaves broad streaks of sunlight came down, and lit up the shady lanes and the scarlet

fairly cups that nestled in the moss ; and, in such a spring as this, April became the most enchanting time of all the year.

Such a large party met Mr. Clayton at the station, that he grew fairly bewildered over his nieces, and required Joyce's assistance to separate Miss Smith from the party, and to identify the tall, lithe Elsie as belonging to him at all. Bella was the only absent one : she had pleaded a headache, which her heavy eyes showed was no fabrication, and shut herself into her room, desiring that she might not be disturbed. But Mr. Follaton, Miss Villars, Miss Smith, and the four girls were sufficient to form a sort of triumphal procession, with which to escort Mr. Clayton to the Rectory ; and as to Joyce, she was thoroughly happy. The very sight of her father seemed to drive away the clouds which had of late been gathering ; she felt as if, now things would take right proportions, and go more smoothly. Perhaps, until to-day, she never knew how much she had depended upon him, even in what seemed the more than usually independent life of her home. She watched him proudly, thinking he looked very tall and handsome, and noticing Mr. Follaton's amusement at the bright, humorous touches which lightened the whole conversation. She was unusually silent herself, content with the one clasp ; the quick, fond look that greeted her just giving the refreshment she wanted, and making her heart cry out, 'There is no one like papa !'

Arrived at the house, Mr. Clayton's first inquiry was for Bella ; but she did not make her appearance until dinner-time, and then came down looking pale and spiritless as usual, and sheltering herself behind her sisters. Joyce was a little scandalised that her father's manner was the same with her as with Anne and Elsie : nay, she even thought that she caught his eye fixed



upon her with a look of pity, such as the unsparing young judge could not understand.

Papa does not know her,' she said to herself.

In all other respects the evening was very satisfactory. She gave herself up to the delight of listening to the dear, familiar voice, and watching the bright cordiality overcoming by degrees his nieces' shyness. Mr. Clayton was not so deeply read as his brother-in-law, for his opportunities of study had been fewer, and he had never experienced the temptation of retiring from an active life. But his information was more varied, his manner of imparting it more pleasant; and through it all there flashed out the almost boyish light-heartedness that rarely deserted him, and gave an indescribable charm to his words. Argument he slipped out of wherever a loophole presented itself, for he could not cope with Mr. Follaton in his favourite warfare. His mind was too sympathetic, and, in seeing both sides of the question by means of a vivid imagination, it followed that it was impossible for him to concentrate his weapons of offence or attack. To be a good arguer, you must not allow your fancy to be discursive.

But Joyce, who knew his face perfectly, observed now and then the twinkle of amusement in his eye at some of the strong Elmwood prejudices. To live in London was to them a lot too terrible to be calmly contemplated; and Mr. Clayton, who was very far from considering himself victimised by that necessity, was somewhat astonished to find what a grateful sense of relief he was expected to feel at his release even for a short time from its miseries.

'Dreadful!' said Elsie.

'Oh, dreadful!' echoed Anne.

'Plenty to see and hear, at all events,' said Mr. Clayton, laughing.

‘Oh, Uncle Regie, but I hate sight-seeing.’

‘But you liked the diver when you were a little girl,’ put in conscientious Anne, ‘and the Zoological Gardens.’

‘Yes, when I was little——’

‘Only now you have grown beyond London; is that it, Elsie?’

Mr. Clayton asked good-humouredly.

‘I had rather be at home,’ said Elsie, stoutly.

‘Papa,’ interrupted Joyce, ‘were the Easter decorations good?’

‘Very fair, my dear; James Bennett outdid himself. Did you make Joyce useful here, Anne?’

‘She tried to show us how to do some things that would have been beautiful,’ said Anne, speaking with difficulty; ‘but—but we did not much like to have a great deal that was new.’

‘You preferred the old way of doing it?’

‘No, not quite—at least, I am not sure; but I should have tried to get used to it; and I dare say Joyce was quite right—only, Uncle Regie, you see, there are so many old people who come to St. Mary’s, people who don’t like to see things different from what they used to be; and I don’t think they would be offended, because they are fond of papa, but they would have been distressed and worried.’

‘But, papa,’ interrupted Joyce, eagerly, ‘I tell Anne that if she waits until everybody is pleased she will wait for ever.’

‘Yes,’ said Anne, looking as she always did on these occasions, unprepared to argue with her cousin, but not thoroughly convinced.

‘You are quite right, my dear,’ said Mr. Clayton, kindly; ‘and I am glad you have not allowed Joyce to ride rough-shod over your opinions. She has a touch of the persecuting spirit in her, you must know, and is inclined to give you the choice of her theories or the stake.’

‘I did not mean——’ began Anne, in great distress lest her uncle’s words should have hurt his daughter; but, looking up, she saw her smiling at him with such comfortable confidence, that she stopped suddenly, and began to wonder whether ridicule was such a formidable weapon after all.

‘Elsie is among the old people,’ said Joyce. ‘I would let her off the decorations, if she would only consent to like something beyond Tate and Brady.’

‘I think some of those hymns you showed me were pretty,’ said the cousin attacked; ‘but the others seem a great deal more natural now that they have been used so long. Why should one alter?’

‘I admit the force of Anne’s objection as applied to a body,’ replied Mr. Clayton; ‘but, having got hold of individual You, Elsie, I should say that age is not always lovely, and that there are venerable abuses as well as venerable treasures. In the case of Tate and Brady, moreover, they have never so much as reached age at all. What do you think about it, Bella?’

Bella started, looked up, and coloured. She had listened to the talk while apparently buried in a book—listened with a bitter resentful feeling that she was shut out from the merry circle by an impassable barrier. She was sure that Joyce, who despised her so greatly, had made her father adopt the same impression; and she hardened herself more and more, and kept gloomily out of the conversation. Miss Villars watched her tenderly, Mr. Clayton with a little wonder: this Bella, silent, reserved, and rather sullen, was very unlike the girl Clement described, bent upon pleasing and showing off; and Joyce’s letter had made him think of her anxiously. When he asked her the sudden question, she would have answered that she did

not know what he was talking about, but that her uncle did not give her time.

‘I think I saw in your face,’ he said, ‘that you are not so persuaded of the virtues of Tate and Brady as Elsie. What do you say?’

‘Everything here is horrid!’ was Bella’s impetuous reply, and then she buried herself again in her book; and Mr. Follaton came into the room, carrying a precious folio for Mr. Clayton to examine, and the girls had no more of their uncle for the evening. He could only say to Joyce, as he kissed her in the hall,

‘I am prepared for an early walk to-morrow, if you will come.’

‘Yes, indeed. Thank you, papa. Wait for me in the garden, please.’

She was waiting for him instead, looking so fresh and eager that he held her at arm’s length, and said, with a smile,

‘You are a more satisfactory daughter than you were last night, let me tell you.’

‘I am quite right again, now that you are come; or, at all events, I am going to be right. Papa, I have wanted you dreadfully, and so have other people in consequence. There are a great many mistakes to be undone.’

Mr. Clayton looked grave. ‘My dear,’ he said, ‘you will have to fight your way through those yourself.’

‘But you will show me how to do it?’

He did not answer for a moment, when he said, ‘Joyce, I shall feel that I have made a more terrible mistake than any of yours, if I have not taught you where to look for guidance, and where to seek for help.’

‘I do not remember it half enough,’ she said, humbly; ‘but,

papa, I am trying not to rush so eagerly after my own will. What am I to do? I am always wanting to alter things that don't seem right, and I get puzzled about it. If I was older! Is it wrong to feel this desire?'

Mr. Clayton thought before he replied. 'I believe it is good, Joyce. I believe that God has given you your energetic active spirit to do the work He has specially prepared for you. You need not wish it changed, only kept in hand. Feel that it is by doing His will we best do His work; feel that His will means patience, and gentleness, and kindly forbearance, and humility; and set yourself to win them, and the blessing that comes with them.'

'The very things I fail in!' said she, sighing.

'The very things. But, with these guards, you need not fear making so many mistakes as have lately troubled you.'

'Well, then, papa, I suppose one ought to wish and try to improve matters, though not to fuss when others don't see them in the same light?'

'I think so, Joyce. Prejudices, even when they are only prejudices, should be respected. And, surely, already many circumstances must have taught you to distrust your own judgment, and to learn the value of forbearance.'

'What do you think about Bella?' was the abrupt answer.

'I don't know what to think, except that she is entirely different from anything I expected to see.'

'Yes, she is quite altered. Will you talk to her?'

Mr. Clayton could not help smiling, in spite of his daughter's earnestness. 'My dear Joyce, I did not come down in order to act as Mentor to all the family. And if you want to hear my conclusions on the subject of Bella, I believe her to be very unhappy, and more likely to be affected for good by her aunt's

lovingness than by any other influence. Look at the beautiful glow on that field !'

'I wonder——' began Joyce, ponderingly ; she finished her sentence with saying in a doubtful tone, 'I cannot conceive dear, kind, soft-hearted Miss Villars having an influence with anybody.'

'We shall see,' said her father : 'meanwhile, you might study the fable of the sun and the wind.'

After this, their walk became somewhat silent ; she happily content in the perfect confidence which seemed more delightful than ever, after losing it for so many weeks ; he thinking over many things, one being at last betrayed by his question of how Joyce liked Ursule.

'Very well, indeed, papa. And I think it is just as well,' she added, colouring a little under his eyes, but speaking without an instant's hesitation.

'Oh !' said Mr. Clayton, 'then I suppose it is as I guessed.'

'Did you guess it ?' exclaimed his daughter in great wonder. 'Yes, I am sure it is so ; only I don't like to see that poor child looking so pale and wretched as she has done during the past week ; and I quite thought matters would have progressed by this time.'

Mr. Clayton walked on, relieved from the doubt which, since his wife's words, had every now and then uncomfortably presented itself, and a little amused at Joyce's patronage. She asked the next question :

'Elsie is very pretty, is she not ?'

'Yes, with the frankest, honestest expression I have seen for a long time.'

'And the more you know of her, the better you will like her. One of the provoking ways of Elmwood is Elsie's fashion of retiring into a shell before the outer world.'

‘I suppose, Joyce, that the perfection of manners consists in remaining natural at all times, neither shutting up nor forcing oneself forward; but, as the young ladies of the present day incline unmistakably towards the latter extreme, I have sympathy for Elsie’s failing.’

‘Well, papa, the world would be a very disagreeable place if we had to make all our acquaintances by means of such an uphill progress,’ retorted Joyce, gaily. ‘However, I don’t want to make you find fault with my dear old Elsie; I want you to carry her back with us, and see whether London would enlarge her ideas.’

Mr. Clayton did not at once answer. He had thought of the plan himself; and then, since he had been at Elmwood, his mind had been a good deal occupied with Bella, and it had struck him again that it would be a good thing for the girl if she could be set down in a different place for a time, to make, as it were, a new start. He felt that he must wait a little, and observe more closely—for Bella’s own sake—before he proposed it; and, therefore, he did not answer definitely. ‘We will see about it,’ he said. ‘Perhaps Elsie would not like it.’

‘Oh, I think she would venture under our wing. And you would like her; she is very good and reverent-minded. There is the breakfast-bell!’

After breakfast, Mr. Clayton was carried off to see the Cottage and its inhabitants. Ursule and he took to each other at once. She had not yet seen any one so genial and pleasant, who seemed to put all around him at ease, and to be unaffected by the little stiff barriers which chilled herself; and he, for his part, was struck and a little puzzled by a quiet sadness which did not seem to belong either to her face or to the happy prospects at which Joyce had hinted. Madame d’Aurigny’s

mysterious allusions also perplexed him ; she was dignified in her greeting, and half pathetic, half congratulatory, until poor Mr. Clayton was altogether at a loss to understand her meaning, and began to wonder whether her ailments were ending by affecting her head, and whether this was the reason of Ursule's depression. Yet Joyce laughed so heartily at the idea on their way home, that he could only fall back upon the conclusion that she must be a very eccentric woman, and hope that Clement would accelerate matters so as to give Ursule, before long, a more cheerful home.

'Poor child !' he said, compassionately, 'she looks very dismal.'

'I don't think she need be pitied, papa,' said Joyce, quietly.

'Not when Clement has won her. But I begin to think matters cannot be prosperous.'

It was a point of honour at the Rectory that Mr. Clayton should see all the lions of the neighbourhood, although they were not new to him. His nieces walked with him to the points from whence the finest views were visible. Mr. Follaton took him into a wonderful receptacle, under St. Mary's tower, to show him three precious and begrimed old tiles ; and he spent the usual day at Defforton, lunching at Clement's, and finding him in a very unsatisfactory condition of irritation and excitability, which Mr. Clayton charitably laid to one door, and wondered why things, which might have to all appearances run so smoothly, should be taking crooked turns.

So the days passed by, and on Saturday Mr. Clayton and Joyce were to leave. The latter was surprised that nothing had been said about Elsie accompanying them ; but she never teased her father, and did not again allude to the subject. He wanted more satisfactory knowledge of Bella ; but she avoided



him by every possible device, and kept the same reserved demeanour, though her face grew more dreary every day ; and her uncle's brightest, kindest words failed to win any response.

He had made up his mind, however, that he would get behind the wall of reserve she had set up between herself and the family, and a few words of Miss Villars rendered him more determined.

'Mr. Clayton,' she said to him one day, 'do you think you could manage to say something to Bella? She is very unhappy, I see ; and I am sure I am very unhappy,' she continued, tears filling her gentle eyes. 'I suppose Joyce has told you all about that sad, sad business? I cannot have managed her rightly, and, indeed, you do not know how I feel my unfitness for the position I am placed in, and the girls' disadvantages in consequence. But there does not seem any help for it,' she went on, thinking of her own shortcomings, with a sigh ; 'only, do you think you could speak to Bella?'

'It is like interference,' said Mr. Clayton, a little reluctantly.

'Oh, no !' exclaimed Miss Villars, eagerly—'an uncle and a clergyman ; and I have not dared to say anything about it to my brother-in-law !'

'There, if you will excuse me for saying so, I cannot think you are right. There can be no possible doubt that he ought to know.'

She looked very much distressed. 'Do you indeed feel so strongly?'

'I should feel very strongly indeed if I stood in his place.'

'Poor Bella will be so broken-hearted. And it does not seem quite fair to her, so long after, does it?'

'I suspect that no misery would be so unbearable as she is suffering now.'

‘Oh, Mr. Clayton, I see what a terrible mistake I have made! I do indeed reproach myself. But if you would be so very, very good as to say a few words to Bella, and then tell me what you think I had better do.’

‘I shall not change my opinion, I forewarn you,’ said he, smiling; ‘but, if this course seems more desirable to you, I will try what can be done.’

Without seeking the opportunity more prominently than he desired, it was difficult to find it; but in the afternoon a chance did arrive. At luncheon a walk was planned in which he was to join; but afterwards he found certain letters required an answer by that day’s post, and they were obliged to start without him, he promising to meet them on their way back. Coming into the drawing-room an hour afterwards, he found Bella buried in one of the great arm-chairs, reading. When she saw him, she sprang up in dismay.

‘Uncle Reginald!’

‘Not gone with the others, Bella?’

‘I had a headache,’ she said, standing up and turning her face away.

‘How many headaches you seem to have!’

‘I can’t help it. It is very bad; that’s all I know.’

‘Poor child!’

She twisted herself uneasily, and glanced at the door.

‘Sit down again in that great chair, and let us have a quiet talk. I want to ask you a question. I have not said anything about it yet, from doubt whether you would like it; but, supposing I can gain permission, do you feel disposed to go back to London with us?’

Bella looked at her uncle, and tears slowly gathered in her eyes.

‘Away from Elmwood?’ she said, with a deep sigh of relief;

then her face changed again, and hardened into the old expression. 'You and Joyce? No, thank you, I could not go.'

'And why not with Joyce?' he said, determined to take the subject by the horns at once. 'Why not with Joyce?' he repeated, as she continued silent.

'She sets my sisters against me,' was the dogged answer.

'Surely not.'

'She does;' and suddenly, to his great amazement, Bella burst into a passion of sobs, so violently uncontrollable that the few words he attempted to say were quite unheard; and he held his peace, glad that, at any cost, the long silence was breaking.

But he would not let her rush away, when the fit had partially exhausted itself. He put his hand on her arm, and said gravely, but kindly,

'Why do you think that Joyce would do as you say, Bella? It is not at all like her.'

A little awed by her uncle's manner, she stammered something about 'everybody' and 'unkindness.'

'Suppose we put aside others, and get to the root of the matter. Something is making you very miserable, my poor child, and it would be far better for you to talk it over.'

There was no withstanding the tone of interest. Bella looked up and sobbed,

'Indeed, I did not think it was so wrong.'

Luckily, Mr. Clayton knew enough from Joyce to understand the reference, and to be able to answer,

'It would have gone on to worse if your eyes had not been opened. Any shame, any punishment, is better than the misery of being left to ourselves.'

'Every one has turned against me!' Then finding she re-

ceived no answer, she continued, 'They all do things that are not right sometimes; I don't see why I should be picked out.'

'Has Miss Villars turned against you, as you call it?' asked Mr. Clayton, quietly.

'No; but Joyce has—and Elsie.'

'Oh, Bella! And you mean to say that anger with them has all this time kept you back from seeking your peace with God! What days, what weeks, of wretchedness you must have suffered!'

A great sob was the answer.

'Once or twice I—I nearly told Aunt Clare that I was sorry; but Joyce looked as if she despised me so, and I thought she should not know I minded.'

Mr. Clayton sighed. 'Surely you have learnt that all such things are as nothing compared with the reality of which one has to think. It is putting the fear of man first. Bella, your Confirmation-time cannot be very far off.'

She shrank back with a distressed look.

'Only think of that—think of the outspoken profession on which no shade of any cowardice must rest.'

'I can't be—I don't want to be confirmed!'

'That is to say, you desire no strength—seek no help: you are content to rest upon yourself. Have the last weeks permitted you to feel that?'

'No, no!'

'Then you mean, you dare not ask for God's blessing? I do not wonder, my poor Bella,' he said, sadly—'I do not wonder that you fear. If all this time you have felt your sin and never owned it, it must have hung over you like a dreary shadow, blotting out everything that is fair and good. It is useless to

attempt to deceive ourselves: we can have no hope without repentance.'

'You will not believe me if I say what is the truth,' said Bella, quickly.

'I will believe you entirely.'

'I know I have been all wrong; I am sorry.'

She spoke in a very low voice, and her face grew crimson as she made the acknowledgment.

'Then,' said her uncle, cheerfully, 'you are taking one step in the right path. And the first is the hardest. If you are really sorry—sorry for the sin, I mean, and not taken up with thinking of the consequences—you will not mind what difficulties stand in the way of proving your repentance.'

'Uncle Regie, what ought I to do?'

'You ought to confess all to your father.'

'Oh, no; don't say that!' She turned upon him a frightened, imploring look. 'I cannot do that—anything else; but he does not know. I cannot, I cannot!'

'Then I cannot help you,' he replied, resolutely. 'If you could only understand that no bitterness of disgrace can equal the bitterness of sin, you would not hesitate.'

'I have told you——'

'Yes. Thank God that you have done so, because it has cost you something. And, by His grace, you can go on to do what you know to be right.'

'Oh, it would be so hard. I should not know what to say.'

Mr. Clayton was silent.

'I will tell Aunt Clare,' she said, piteously. 'I have always wanted to tell her.'

'That means only that you will accept the relief without the shame.'

She was trembling and looking imploring, and her uncle felt a great deal of compassion for her weakness ; but he believed a victory now, at whatever cost, to be of infinite importance ; and he would not yield even so far as to take away the first difficulty, by himself going to Mr. Follaton. She needed a sharp lesson, and he believed she was having it, when, in the midst of more tears, she sobbed out,

‘If you say I must, I must ; but you don’t know how dreadful it is to tell papa ! And I don’t know where to begin.’

‘One word about that, Bella. When you are thinking over your fault, remember that the beginning of all this stretches very far back. They are the little daily slips—want of care, want of accuracy—that prepare the mind for exaggeration, and lead it, little by little, out of the path of truth. Your father will tell you what vigilance you will require.’

He put his hand kindly on her shoulder as he spoke, and then he went away and left her, not wishing to do more than lead her to her rightful earthly guide, but feeling as if Joyce’s share in the matter had made his interference so far desirable. That evening Bella did not come down ; Miss Villars looked tearfully happy, and Mr. Follaton restless. No occupation of his own appeared to please him ; but as he and his brother-in-law were separating for the night, he wrung Mr. Clayton’s hand, saying,

‘Thank you for your goodness to my poor child. I have been very blind.’

‘It has led to her giving good proof of repentance ; for I suspect that, with a nature like Bella’s, confession needs a considerable effort.’

‘She is in a sad state yet.’

‘Suppose you were to let her go back with us on Saturday,

and send Elsie as well? It seems to me that such a break is of advantage when there has been a sort of smiting down of self-respect, as is the case with her. You would trust me to look after her?’

‘I must think of it,’ said Mr. Follaton, ponderingly. ‘The Confirmation hangs heavy on her heart, poor child!’

‘I have hopes that it will come to her now at a time when she not only needs it, but feels the need.’

‘Motherless children!’ Mr. Clayton heard his brother-in-law say under his breath. ‘Well—thank you. We are all indebted to you; but you must let me think it over before I can determine.’

His determination was announced the next morning, a little more promptly, and without appeal, than Mr. Clayton was prepared to hear. He thought Bella would have some choice given her, and he pitied the look of dismay with which she listened. But, apparently, Mr. Follaton had made up his mind that there should be no hesitation in carrying out the course he resolved upon; and Elsie’s astonishment prevented any notice being taken of her sister. In the excitement and difficulties of preparation, when preparation was only allowed one day, Elsie had not time to be sure whether she liked or disliked the notion; and Joyce was so kind and so delighted that she gave her cousin no opportunity for indulging in frightened forebodings.

But Bella was going where once she had longed to go, with all the brightness taken out of her prospect. True, Joyce had voluntarily told her father that she believed her own want of forbearance grievously stood in her cousin’s way; nor did he deny her.—True, Bella turned to Mr. Clayton with an affection which made her content if only he was in the room; but yet there was a sore feeling of shame, rendering it hard to go unless

it had been to those who knew nothing of her fault ; and she clung to Miss Villars as if until now she had never known the worth of that unwearying, trustful love which seemed as if it could not fail or falter.

Ursule came early in the morning to wish the travellers good-bye.

‘Why does she not look a little brighter?’ thought Joyce, impatiently.

‘She will come back soon,’ thought Ursule. But still she wondered that Clement had not been there since Mr. Clayton’s first days at the Vicarage. She wondered that Mr. Clayton should have spoken in so warm a tone of kindness, and said so markedly that ere long he hoped they would be better known to each other. She wondered most of all to hear Joyce sending a message through Anne to Clement, to the effect that, in case she did not see him before the summer was over, he might be sure her mother would like the cuttings he proposed sending.

‘What does it all mean?’ Ursule thought in amazement.

And in the railway-carriage Mr. Clayton’s first speech made Elsie and Bella open their eyes in amazement greater still.

‘We must resign ourselves, I suppose’ he said, with a sigh, ‘to see less of Clement ; but I really believe she will make him a most sweet little wife.’







## CHAPTER XXV.

### UNDER THE CEDARS.

She smiled securely—‘He loves me purely:  
A true heart’s safe, both in smile and frown;  
And nothing harms me while his love warms me,  
Whether the world go up or down.’

*Poems by the author of ‘John Halifax.’*

**I**T was in May that Ursule learned what it all meant. Something prevented Mr. Blunt from coming to Elmwood on the day the four travellers left the Rectory; and another Saturday arrived before he could, with a clear conscience, find himself at the Cottage. Letters had been received from both the sisters—Elsie ecstatically happy, delighted with her prospects of sight-seeing, and able to find amusement in an outside view of the throng of a London season, while she was not obliged to do more than look on, under the care of Mrs. Clayton and Joyce—Bella writing in a subdued tone, and with an evident yearning after her aunt’s tenderness, although, as she expressed it, everybody was very kind.

As for Anne, she was more brisk than had ever been known before. Whether alone her excellent qualities had more room for expansion, whether Elsie’s higher spirits quenched, and

Joyce frightened her, or whether a few words of encouragement which Mr. Clayton let fall, accompanied by what seemed a chance remark, to the effect that the profit of others is often best effected by pleasing them, worked the change, it is impossible to say. The only certainty is, that she forced herself into exertions from which she had hitherto persistently shrunk ; and that it was evident they were wholesome exertions, and likely to be persevered in like Anne's other conscientious beginnings.

The place was quieter than ever : even the little stir kept up by the goings and comings from the Hall was wanting, since Mrs. Chambers was away in London, and the place given up to servants. Ursule was glad. Ever since that memorable dinner-party, Mrs. Chambers had been kind to her ; indeed, rather enthusiastic in her praise. But, although she fought bravely against the feeling, she experienced a sense of weariness and a longing for quiet which made all solitude grateful. And she liked better to walk to the Hall, and saunter under the cedars, watching the blue expanse of sea glimmer between a veil of flickering leaves, without fear of interruption or remark, than to hear Mr. Chambers's kindly greeting or his hospitable suggestion that she should stay to luncheon.

Now and then—very rarely—she received a few lines from her father, written always in the same language of easy selfishness ; not averse to her enjoying her share of the good things of the earth, so long as his own was secured to him. He was interested in her accession of riches—the more so, since it did away with the necessity for remittances. ‘Be prudent, above all things, my dear child,’ he wrote. ‘Should adverse circumstances occur, for which it is the part of a wise man to be prepared, it will, I know, rejoice your dutiful heart to offer a home to your father in his old age. I look forward to it as a resource ;

for that pastoral life you describe so charmingly, although a shade remains upon it of—well, we will not say dulness, we will call it sobriety, such as possesses a positive charm for the young, may one day invite me to take refuge in its arms. As yet the Brussels existence has not exhausted its attractions, but it delights me occasionally to indulge a dream of flight to your little contented household.’

Such hints made Ursule shiver with the dread of what might happen to Madame should her father appear, and expect her to support him, and to wonder whether it would have been better for Madame, if she had indeed removed to that other home, which was beginning again to look strangely unreal and misty, and herself gone back in answer to Madame Sanson’s perpetual pleadings for her return. But Madame d’Aurigny had no wish of the kind. The life she led, in spite of the pain, suited her better than that of Dieppe. More acquaintances had sought her; she had a larger share of actual comfort. She grumbled, but, on the whole, she was not discontented with her lot. Always, indeed, in spite of her growing affection for her young companion, self engrossed the first thought; and now her mind was occupied with, and her lips continually talking of, Clement and his prospects, until poor Ursule, haunted by that strange afternoon in the green-house, felt sick at heart, and a disbeliever in Madame’s prognostications of the immense happiness in store for the young couple, and would be driven to seek for peace elsewhere.

It was on one such occasion that she and Jock escaped to the shelter of the Hall cedars, when the day was sufficiently hot and dry for her to fling herself down upon the grass, and wonder at the marvellous beauty of all around her. She had a book in her pocket; but a better book lay open before her, and

she did not begin to read. 'There was an hour at her own disposal, before she needed to think of her return to Madame, and no fear of interruptions. The cedars, in their calm, solemn majesty, stood like kings in the midst of the other trees, unaffected by the passing seasons, and wearing always an unfading crown. The air was full of buzz and life; the birds sang jubilantly in the branches; the distant break of the waves came up regularly: and every sound was beautiful and in 'sweet accord.' How long Ursule sat there she could never tell; when she looked up, it was with a start, for some one was making his way rapidly towards her across the grass, and, to her amazement, she recognized the intruder as Mr. Blunt.

Jock was leaping round him, and giving glad welcome, by the time she was on her feet, listening to his quick explanation.

'I have been successful at last! Bessie informed me that she thought you had gone to the Hall.'

Poor Ursule's heart beat: it was hard that all her efforts to escape persecution should have been in vain; harder still to drive back the glad throb called up by something in his manner. But she remembered Joyce, and answered coldly,

'I am sorry you should have taken so much trouble.' Then, faltering as she caught his pained look, 'We are just going home: perhaps—perhaps you would like to go on, and see the gardens?'

'No, thank you,' answered Clement, slowly; 'that was not my purpose in coming here.'

He stopped, and Ursule felt as if such pauses would be unendurable. She was still standing where he had found her, unwilling to move lest he should offer to return, unwilling, also, to protract the interview by remaining; not knowing what she should do, but conscious that, at all risks, long uncomfortable pauses had better be avoided.

‘I think we must go,’ she repeated, offering her hand in desperation.

Clement took no notice of the proffer. He stood still, looking a little moodily at the grass and the inoffensive daisies under his feet. Jock went up, and put his cold nose into his hand in token of sympathy ; Ursule grew impatient of her situation.

‘*Allons*, Jock,’ she said. ‘Good-bye, Monsieur.’

‘I beg your pardon,’ he answered, starting forward ; ‘we are going the same way, as far as I know. Or did you really suppose that I have walked here for the purpose of saying no more than two words?’

She would not answer. She called all her dignity to her aid, and, by way of safeguard, asked whether he had heard very lately from Joyce.

‘Not since she left,’ was the careless reply, which left her half wondering, half indignant at his coolness. But the next words set her thoughts in a whirl. ‘Why are you like this?—what has changed you lately? Oh, Ursule, do not tell me that all this time I have been buoying myself up with false hopes—you must know what they are. Will you not give me one word of assurance?’

He poured out the words with eager rapidity. Frightened and bewildered, she could only stammer, ‘Joyce——’

‘Joyce! What has she to do with the matter?’

‘Oh, Monsieur, but—you told Madame that——’

‘What? Nothing but that I loved you, my Ursule!’

It flashed upon her in a moment ; the bright flush deepened on her cheeks ; she covered her face with her hands. Clement had his answer, though no sound was heard but a burst of thrush-song from the wood.

‘Where has been the doubt?’ he asked tenderly, drawing



*The end of Ursule's Troubles.*



away her hands, and triumphing in the shy glance that for one moment met his own. 'Surely, you have not been blind to my secret?'

'I could not understand,' she whispered; 'and Madame told me that you had talked of—Joyce; and you had settled Madame should live with you. Was it not so, truly?' she said, raising her head quickly, with a sudden access of doubt. 'Ah, Monsieur, do you mean what you say?'

He smiled at the notion. 'Every word. And, you may be assured, never a thing have I said to my aunt, out of which any other meaning could be extracted. I can only suppose she set off with a false impression, so that, somehow or other, we played at cross purposes.'

But still she did not look quite satisfied, and Clement perceived the shadow. 'That must have made the mischief,' he said, anxiously.

'Yes; only, have you thought it all over—are you sure? I am not like Joyce, or one of your young English ladies: in my country, you know that I am not even as I am here; and Madame says you must all look down upon me.

I am afraid that Mr. Blunt, under his breath, muttered some hard words of Madame.

'And,' went on Ursule, lifting her little head, and speaking bravely, 'if it is to humiliate you, I will never marry you—never, never!'

But, as she looked up, she met his eyes fixed upon her so tenderly that she felt a trembling conviction that her bravery would not long hold out. And when in low quiet words he began to speak, standing before her with the sea behind him and the cedars over his head, when he told her how dear she was—how thankful he felt for the gift of her love—how he had



been tormented with the dread that she would suspect him of caring for the recovery of his home, instead of caring for her—how, during the past weeks, he had waited and longed for one sign of kindly interest, and was alternately urged on and kept back by impatience and fear for the result—how, at length, stung with a determination to know the worst, he had followed her that morning to put his hopes to the touch—all misgivings faded completely out of her heart, and the deep radiant happiness of her smile contented even Clement.

Nevertheless, a lurking mischief made her say, as they walked home the roundabout way, through green lanes and down a hill as steep as a roof, ‘Ah, but you disliked me with all your might, Monsieur Clement.’

Madame d’Aurigny’s first surprise was exceedingly entertaining. Ursule was grateful that it was only surprise and not displeasure, for which she was prepared, her humility acknowledging herself all unworthy of her happiness. But, indeed, Madame, when once she had recovered from the shock of finding her prophecies in error, was very glad at heart. That Clement and Ursule should both have their homes at the Cottage, and that she need yield neither of those who were most dear to her, was so thoroughly a fulfilment of what she desired, that, for one whole day, no power of complaining seemed to remain with her. More than that it would have been idle to expect; and what was any complaining to Ursule, with so deep a well of happiness in her own thoughts? She was too grateful for the sunshine that came to her with Clement to shrink from whatever roughness yet lay in her path; and, indeed, before this sunshine came, she had not shrunk. What had seemed dreary and difficult when she felt herself indifferent to Madame, she had conscientiously endeavoured to go through

with as a duty ; out of the duty grew affection ; and then, as in Madame's heart there awoke something beyond the mere dependence of selfishness—then there came the beginning of the reward. Better for her than even the sad, sweet teaching brought by Louis' death had been the daily training of the last few months ; and Clement, looking proudly at her, and wondering how he could have ever so misjudged her, was charging himself with blindness more severely than he deserved.

He was resolved there should be no delay, nor, indeed, could Ursule bring forth any plea for it. Holidays were not at all times practicable ; and when he had proved beyond question that it would be ruinous to his prospects to take one at any other time than at the end of the following month, what was to be said ? The trustees were highly satisfied with the proposed marriage, feeling themselves secured by its means from certain awkward contingencies which it was not impossible might arise ; and as to the wonder of relations and acquaintances, that expended itself upon the first announcement of the tidings. At the Rectory, Anne and Miss Villars talked and wondered, and wondered and talked ; and Miss Villars could not be sure whether it was her duty to be sorry while her kindly nature inclined her to be glad, until Ursule, with smiles and blushes, showed her Mr. Clayton's hearty letter of congratulation, and its warmth of tone and unquestionable pleasure assured her that she might indulge her own sympathy to the fullest.

Mr. Clayton had been let into the secret, before he left Elmwood, by Clement, so that the news had no chance of taking him by surprise ; and he was comically delighted at having, moreover, been the first upon whom a suspicion of the course matters were taking had dawned. And Joyce ? If she answered her father with a shade less of brightness than usual, it was too

slight for any one to notice it ; if she spent a little more than her ordinary time in the quiet of her own room, it was not to waste the hours in selfish repinings, but to pray with a single heart for the welfare of one who had been to her almost more than brother, and to acknowledge with thankfulness the blessing of having striven to follow her father's advice, and to keep watch and ward over her inner thoughts.

And when she came down, it was prepared to fight all Ursule's battles, if battles were needed before Elsie accepted her as a cousin. But she found, to her amusement, that the very fact of cousinship constituted a superior being.

'I was beginning to like her,' said Elsie, 'and now, of course, one must.'

'By force of what?'

'Oh, in a sort of way, she will belong to the family, and won't any longer seem strange.'

'Well,' said Joyce, checking the answer she was going to make, 'you know I never can understand the principles upon which it is necessary to confine one's likings to the circle immediately touching one ; but, if you won't mind my saying so, Elsie, it seems to me as if that reason of yours carried us a good deal further than you allow.'

'How do you mean?' asked her cousin, with some wonder. Then, as it dawned upon her, she added, hurriedly, 'Oh, Joyce, surely not in such little things as I mean!'

'Don't you think so? I can't see where the application ends : it must take in the little things, for, as to that, it is in those very little things that one has so much more to do with people than in great. I am only repeating what I once heard papa say, when some one was talking about this very thing, and making out that faults of manner and off-hand ways did no

harm. He would not allow it, and said that as want of outward kindness between brothers and sisters was wrong, so one ought to cultivate a loving spirit with all those with whom one comes in contact, and that it was best effected by keeping the great family bond in view. And, when one thinks of it, it is really an absurd contradiction to profess the spirit, and allow oneself to be disagreeable and repellant.'

Joyce paused, a little afraid that she might have hurt her cousin. But Elsie was too sweet-tempered and conscientious to take offence at words such as these. She sat in the window-seat in the drawing-room, where the two girls were alone, and she folded her arms on the window-ledge, and looked out into vacancy, while she turned the matter in her mind.

'I wonder whether you are right,' she said, thoughtfully, at last, when Joyce had given up much expectation of an answer. 'I don't think we have ever looked at it in that light; and so long as we were happy in ourselves, it didn't seem much difference about troubling over other people. But I do think it must be right to be as pleasant as Uncle Reginald, and, though he is a clergyman, perhaps one ought not to feel the less bound.'

'No, indeed!' said Joyce, amused.

'One thing, I must say, makes me fancy you may be right—poor Bella. I believe she had a great wish to be pleasant and popular with everybody, and that, instead of helping her to treat it rightly, Anne and I—I especially—made fun of it, and took a sort of pride in showing that we thought it a fine thing to be disagreeable to people. You know what I mean. And so, I suspect, this made the temptation to run into the opposite extreme more powerful to her, and, in wanting to avoid our ways, she fell into trouble herself.'

'Poor Bella! It is very hard to break off that habit of exaggeration!'

'She is trying, I am sure.'

'Yes, indeed,' answered Joyce, heartily; 'papa says he is often touched to see how much.'

And there the conversation ended, not to be forgotten. Something in it had taken hold of Elsie. Such a motive as J oyce suggested, if it was in its right place, could not be neglected. Moreover, the very thought of it gave a spur to what otherwise seemed only disagreeable and useless. Perhaps the little introduction into a new world, and that world London, made the efforts easier; but certainly Joyce remarked with satisfaction that Elsie no longer fled at the sound of the front-door bell, or sat looking unutterable things from remote corners of the room when visitors were ushered in.

Joyce's life, with her fund of activity and energy, could not be otherwise than busy; nor would her father have had it otherwise. The qualities were too precious to be repressed; but with thankful contentment he saw added to them a growing humility, the fruit of a truer knowledge of herself—nay, of a germ of the conviction which comes but slowly to such natures, that work, high and holy as it is, is not in itself the highest and holiest thing—is a means, but not the end. And if to her the happiness might never be granted which in the glad brightness of early summer made Ursule's heart quiver with joy as she walked by Clement's side through the cool, green Elmwood lanes, God holds in His own hands the secret springs of gladness, and assuredly they should be poured upon her in His good measure.

For Ursule, the brightness of life filled her with grateful wonder. The restful sense of dependence was a new delight, un-

known even in her love for Louis. Always she had been accustomed to act independently, to act and to advise ; and to have one to whom she could look for guidance, whose bidding it was happiness to obey, seemed to her a privilege for which she could never be sufficiently thankful. And yet, with all this sweet, shy clinging, Clement felt that his little wife would never yield him a blind obedience ; her love was too deep and true for that—too thoroughly interwoven with the other love which, little by little, step by step, had guided her into the knowledge of itself. Looking up at him one morning wistfully, she said,

‘Clement, you have read my father’s letter?’

‘Yes, I have read it,’ he said, with an indignant emphasis which did not escape her. She sighed as she went on—

‘I think he means to be kind in what he says—in his good wishes.’

‘Good wishes are inexpensive,’ answered Clement drily. ‘Seriously, I cannot think calmly of his conduct, made up, as it is, of unmitigated selfishness. When in the world has he ever acted towards you as if he felt the smallest fatherly affection? What possible claim could he have the face to make for duty’s sake?’

‘Oh!’ she exclaimed, much distressed, ‘pray, do not say that. You do not know how ill I used to behave. Do not say that again, or I shall be afraid to ask the favour I want you to grant.’

‘What?’ he inquired eagerly.

‘You are so good ; you are going to take me to Dieppe, you know. Dear old Madame, how delighted she will be !—what a welcome she will give us ! But, Clement, if you would not dislike it very much, if you would also let me go to Brussels——’

She hesitated. Clement bit his lip, and looked vexed. She

went on with her gentle pleading, 'He is my father—the only relation belonging to me : it would make me very happy.'

'Would it?' he said presently, after a pause; 'then we will go. I believe, after all, that you are right; but, right or wrong, you have cared for my aunt too long for me to object to any sacrifice you may think it well to make for your father. Are you satisfied, my Ursule?'

Such deep tenderness as breathed in his voice, such love as looked out from his eyes, were indeed enough to content her, and to call up happy tears. With a little mute action of thankfulness, she slid her hand into his.

'We must not leave Madame desolate very long.'

'Miss Villars will take care of that. Since she has become a favourite, it has made matters easier.'

'Ah, Clement, everything has grown easy now. When I look back, and remember those past days, with their burdens of solitude—when everything appeared gloomy, and I could do no better than judge by externals—it seems to me most wonderful that all my repining has been so borne with, that *this* has been sent at the end. What would Louis say!'

'We shall never forget him.'

'He is nearer than ever in my happiness. I often think how the things I have been slow in learning he accepted without rebellion; and it seems to me now, as if what most we wanted—Church blessings, I mean, of which we knew so little—were supplied to him in some mysterious manner. How he would have appreciated them!'

And Clement repeated, under his breath, 'The communion of saints.'

The words recurred to them both on a fair June morning, when the sun shone gloriously down upon the elms in St. Mary's

churchyard, and the bells pealed merrily in the tower, and man and wife came forth from the old porch to begin their life together, with God's blessing making their happiness holy. The villagers clustered round the path. 'There's Mr. Clement !' said one. 'I can't get a sight of her face,' said another. Nevertheless, Ursule herself had caught a glimpse of two spectators, and she pressed her husband's arm with a thrill of proud delight. Little Phil Blake and his mother stood open-eyed, and gazing at Clement with all the satisfaction in the world that they had something to tell of him on a day when he was the centre of all eyes.

'They must come to the dinner,' whispered Ursule.

'I will tell Anne.'

The commission put Anne at her ease, and made her very happy. Perhaps, indeed, it was Clement's manner in asking her which gave her courage to whisper a few words to Ursule, as the latter came out of Madame d'Aurigny's room, with a smile of infinite happiness shining through tearful eyes.

'Elsie and I are very sorry, though she is not here to say so,' said Anne, bluntly and nervously; 'we weren't kind: and Bella wished me to beg your pardon.'

'No, pray,' began Ursule, much distressed; but then seeing that Anne would not be satisfied without her saying something more than a mere disclaimer, stopped herself, and added, in a different tone, 'If it will make her happier, I hope you will give her my love. And tell Elsie,' she continued, with a brightness which veiled a deeper feeling, 'that I love her Elmwood even better than she can love it. When I look back to last year——'

Clement overheard the words and the faltering tone; for the cousins had reached the foot of the stairs. 'When we look back but one year, my darling,' he whispered tenderly, bending



over her, and concluding the sentence, 'we see the guiding Hand, and recognize that, if our own blind wills had gained their way, the best blessings of our life would have been rejected.'





